



Bernice Summerfield

The Slender-Fingered
Cats of Bubastis

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* * *

*For Lisa, who's read everything I've written since
2001, and always manages to keep it light.*

* * *

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CHAPTER ONE

BEFORE

It wasn't true that you could see the Cats from space. It was impossible, a ridiculous idea that wouldn't stand up to even the slightest examination. And yet there were those on Bubastis who believed it.

The biggest of the five Cats was just over one hundred feet tall, the smallest around seventy. They sat on their haunches, heads held high, and stared out across the endless swamps.

Over the centuries, a handful of ships stopped by, bringing visitors from other planets. No-one on Bubastis had ever been to the stars.

The travellers took pictures and made notes. They examined the primitive carving of the Cats' deep, slanted eyes, their inscrutable smiles and the single insect that appeared beneath each mouth. They wondered at the slender fingers, which extended in two rows from their front paws, one long row and one short, like the keys on a piano. They cursed at the incredible diversity and sheer volume of insect life that called Bubastis home. They didn't stay long.

This pleased the largest insects on the planet, the Bal, who lived on rickety wooden platforms in the marshes. The Bal were not very concerned with the world outside their village, let alone their planet. They had no idea who had built the Cats, or why, and had no interest in finding out. In fact, they avoided the Cats for the same reason they did any visitors, which was that, to a greater or lesser extent, the Bal were all mammal-phobic.

Yet, despite the feelings of revulsion, the Bal tolerated the occasional visits from the mostly-mammalian star travellers, and stipulated only that before leaving their ships, all visitors should read the Bal Rule Book, paying special attention to section forty-seven.

They remained blissfully unaware that, as the book was more than three thousand pages long and rather dry, no non-Bal had ever made it past section two.

Then Professor Neon Tsara's archaeological expedition landed. And things changed forever.

Day One: When I first set eyes on the Cats I was aware that here, in this lonely, out-of-the-way planet was one of the last true mysteries of the Universe. Did these Cats contain a secret? Of this I was sure. Would they give up their secret to me? Alas, I had no clue.

The Diaries of Rintilda Vigintitres

ed. Telford Mark

CHAPTER TWO

LEGION

Even Bernice was surprised to be offered the job.

When Irving found her, she was propping up the bar in the White Rabbit on Legion, watching Jack stack glasses and hoping to bump into Peter. But her son was just too good at staying out of her way these days. She asked Irving what sort of job he'd got for her, but he simply tapped the side of his nose mysteriously – irritatingly – and told her she'd have to listen to the message herself.

Sitting in Irving Braxiatel's second-best office on Legion, she stared in horror at the tiny machine that was patching in the message. Then, she repeated the words back slowly to make absolutely sure she'd heard them correctly. Of all the potential jobs she'd imagined Irving lining up for her, this had not even made the top five hundred.

'He wants me to write a book,' she said slowly, 'of *poetry*?'

Jack, who had abandoned his glass-stacking duties to accompany her, sniggered loudly, then ducked as Bernice threw the closest thing to hand, the manual for Irving's shuttle, at his head.

It wasn't as if Professor Bernice Summerfield had never written a book before – she knew for certain that there were a lot of books out there in the universe with her name on the cover – it was more that she hadn't really given her writing career much thought recently. Even less thought than she had given her academic career, and that had definitely taken a back seat for a while now. In fact, if anyone asked her at a party – not that she got invited to many these days – what she did for a living, she would have gone for 'nothing much,' or 'I have outrageously exciting adventures,' depending on how much she'd had to drink and who she was talking to. 'I'm a writer' would be a long way down the list of potential replies.

And so, as Irving's shuttle left Legion's atmosphere later that day, carrying Bernice, Jack and her friend Ruth swiftly towards a meeting about a poetry book proposal, Bernice couldn't help feeling more than a little puzzled at the turn of events.

'What sort of idiot would think I'd be able to write a book of poetry?' Bernice asked, as she switched the shuttle to autopilot and stood up.

'One who knows how to pique your interest, it seems,' said Jack. He leaned back in his seat with a wicked grin. 'Look at us all rushing off to meet him. How well do you know this "idiot"? Is he a friend? Colleague? *Lover*?'

'Oh shut up,' said Bernice. 'His name's Bil Bil Gloap and he's an old colleague. And by "old" I mean he's about seventy, so no. No love interest there, thank you.'

'Bil Bil?' asked Ruth. She dragged her eyes away from the control panel, where the autopilot was flashing a complicated sequence of lights. 'Two Bils?'

'Yes,' said Bernice firmly. 'That's his name. He'll tell you his father had a stutter if you press him, but please don't. I call him Bil. *You* can call him Professor Gloap.' Jack raised an eyebrow. 'And yes,' she said. 'I'm piqued. I mean, my interest is. Someone I used to know is working near Legion and has managed to track me down. It doesn't happen very often. Don't worry, it's not my inner poet suddenly awakening.'

'That's a relief,' drawled Jack. 'There's only room for one poet around here, and I think we can all agree that it's me.'

'And when was the last time you dashed off a sonnet?' asked Bernice.

'Ah, you don't actually need to *write* poetry when you have the soul of a poet,' said Jack. He placed his hands behind his head and his eyes glowed brightly as he struck a pose that he obviously considered in some way poetical. Bernice couldn't help smiling. She had become so used to being around Jack that she hardly noticed his eyes any more. But then, every now and then, he somehow amped up the brightness and their strange glow caught her by surprise. Did he do it on purpose, she wondered, or was it involuntary?

'Soul of a poet, my arse,' she said, succinctly. 'There are three good reasons for going to see Bil to talk about this book.'

'We're waiting,' grinned Ruth.

'Firstly, he mentioned a substantial fee,' she said, 'which I intend to share with you and Jack for accompanying me. And it's a lot more than Irving's paying you to work in that seedy little bar of his. Secondly, Bil's office is on an exclusive holiday-platform sort of luxury-space-station thingy. He says it's crammed with every type of entertainment you could ever wish for.' She waited for a reaction but none came. 'Sounds more fun than Legion, right?'

'Maybe,' said Jack. 'What's the third reason?'

'Ah,' said Bernice, brightly. 'That's a bit more weird. Basically, Bil says I *have* to write the book because I've already written it in the future, and he's – er – read it. It's due to be published next week.'

'Excuse me?' said Ruth. 'Your friend can travel in time?'

'No, of course not,' said Bernice, smiling at her younger friend's confused expression. 'Don't worry, Ruth. I don't know what he means either. Bil said he'd be able to explain when I saw him.'

'Oh, so it's a *mystery*,' said Jack, stroking his sharply-pointed chin thoughtfully. 'Now I understand why you're so keen to go. Everyone loves a mystery. What's the name of this exclusive holiday place we're hurtling so obediently towards?'

'Star Seasons,' said Bernice. Then, 'Steady!' as Jack leapt to his feet in excitement, flinging his arms out and nearly knocking her over.

'*Star Seasons*?' he crowed. 'As in, "You're rich enough to piss in the pool on Star Seasons!"?'

Bernice gave him a withering look. 'And where did you hear *that* charming proverb?' she asked. 'Don't tell me, it's one of the perks of working at the White Rabbit.'

'Hey, don't knock it,' Jack grinned. 'I get to meet all sorts of interesting people. Last week I was offered the chance to buy eight illegally imported micro-puppies.' He shrugged. 'Not really my cup of tea.'

Ruth stood up, and brushed at her crumpled black top. 'So, we're going somewhere posh then?' she asked. 'I'm not sure my wardrobe's up to posh.'

Jack laughed. 'Not just posh, *extravagantly* posh,' he said. 'This seems the ideal opportunity to debut the new pair of shoes I picked up in the market last week. They're purple,' he added smugly. 'And you're right, Ruthie – that "down-and-out on Legion" look you're working today isn't so hot in millionaire circles right now.'

'I packed a dress to change into,' said Ruth, defensively. 'I packed... well, pretty much every item of clothing I own right now fits in one bag.'

'Don't worry Ruth,' said Jack. 'You'll be fine. You have charm and youthfulness on your side.' He paused. 'What are *you* going to wear, Benny?'

'Oi,' said Bernice, surreptitiously rubbing at a coffee stain on the comfortable trousers she had been wearing for the last four days. 'I don't exactly have an extensive wardrobe either at the moment.'

'Look at it as a golden opportunity for you to discover the least crumpled thing you own,' said Jack, comfortingly. 'But I'm warning you, if it's your shiny grey trousers and that black shirt again, I won't be happy.'

Star Seasons was designed to be an exclusive holiday destination: a luxury space retreat, crammed with entertainments to delight the appetite of even the most jaded billionaire. Originally funded by twenty-three of the biggest corporations on Altan, one by one they abandoned the project and the Altan World Government was forced to bail it out. This caused a lot of public unrest, so the AWG came up with the ingenious plan of incorporating a research facility onboard the platform. It was still the case that not a single taxpayer could afford a visit, of course. But everyone could rest assured that their money had helped put teams of researchers up in the sky to research really important things on their behalf.

The Altan Encyclopedia Vol 2

Hercules McGregor

CHAPTER THREE

STAR SEASONS

‘I think it’s possible,’ said Ruth, as the golden monorail purred into the station at the end of its tour, ‘that your friend Bil has one of the best jobs in the world.’

There was a gentle hiss as the train doors parted. As Bernice stepped out onto the plush carpet, an android server moved along the platform towards them, displaying a tray of sparkling drinks. Its long, thin body was sprayed the pale pink and green colours of Spring. Its face was smooth, silvery and featureless until it saw Bernice, then two eyes, a nose and a mouth shimmered into place in the traditional human positions. Bernice knew from the on-train audio tour that each server had the capacity to approximate any facial features it came upon, in an attempt to make each guest feel comfortable no matter what their planet of origin.

Ruth shook her head at the silent offer of a drink, looking vaguely alarmed by the excitement of the fizzing liquids, which were practically spitting out of the glasses. She gestured at her cream-coloured dress, murmuring that it was her only clean one, and the server gave a patronising snort.

Bernice, who was wearing her grey silk-effect trousers and black shirt partly to irritate Jack and partly because it genuinely was her smartest outfit, had no such qualms. She looked quizzically at the tray for a few seconds then took a white drink and a yellow one. The server arched an electronic eyebrow.

‘Both for you?’ it asked, coldly.

‘One for my friend,’ said Bernice, hurriedly holding out the spitting white drink to Jack, who was perusing the interactive map on the wallscreen to their right. A little light pulsed gently in the middle with ‘You Are Here’ written in soft green letters around it.

‘So where do you fancy going first?’ she asked, running her eyes over the map. ‘I’ll bet it’s a toss-up between the upside-down swimming pool in Summer or the Winter spacewalk café.’

‘Call me a *square*,’ said Jack, drawing the shape in the air with his fingers, ‘but I’m drawn to the Library.’

‘I didn’t notice a library,’ said Bernice, puzzled. Then she clicked. ‘Oh, right. You’re still pretending to be a poet.’

Jack shook his head. ‘It may not have been as obvious as the portable beaches,’ he said, ‘but the fact that the audio tour skipped over it so quickly makes it a little more interesting. It was almost as if they didn’t *want* you to notice it.’

‘I suppose so,’ said Ruth, dubiously, staring at the map. ‘But if I get a choice, I’d like to try the musical suites.’

Bernice agreed. ‘If that equipment works the way they said it did, it’ll be mind blowing.’

‘There are many safety measures in place to prevent any damage to the brain,’ said the server, addressing a large plant in a pot near the wall. The servers on the station followed a conduct script that suggested they shouldn’t speak to anyone directly unless asked a question.

Bernice smiled and moved herself into the server’s line of vision, giving it a little wave. ‘Excuse me,’ she said. ‘Can you direct us to the research facility?’

A frown twitched across the server’s silver face. ‘Have you completed the standard monorail tour?’ it asked.

‘Yes,’ replied Bernice.

‘Twice,’ grinned Ruth. ‘Benny wanted a second look at the water gyms in Summer because she thought she could see into the men’s changing rooms.’

'So you are aware of all that Star Seasons can offer?' said the server, icily.

'Oh yes,' said Ruth.

'Four seasonal zones packed with all the leisure activities you could ever hope for, and a lot more besides.'

'Yep, that's the one,' said Bernice. 'But we didn't see the research station on the tour, and we don't really know which season 'research' falls under, so we've come back to the start to ask someone.'

'What I mean to say is,' said the server, its electronic eyebrows twitching in annoyance, 'you've seen all the activities available, and you want directions to the *research facility*?'

'Ah, I see what you're getting at,' said Bernice. 'We're not guests, we're here to visit a friend. Bil. Bil Bil... *Professor* Bil. Gloap. He works here.'

The server's attitude shifted almost imperceptibly. It glanced at the drink Bernice was holding. She followed its eyes, hurriedly drained the glass and put it back on the tray. Jack took one sip from his glass, winced, and did the same.

The server straightened. 'Star Seasons Research is located in the central tower, levels four to twenty-three,' it said. 'Professor Gloap is resident on sixteen. Ride the monorail to the start of Summer, follow the dark blue trail to the tower, then take the riser.'

'Thanks,' said Bernice.

The server spoke a command into the bottom of the wallscreen and the train's doors slid open to let the passengers board. The server turned away and muttered to the pot plant, in a voice just loud enough for Bernice to hear, 'As I thought. *Research* visitors don't tip.'

Bernice settled back in the soft, velvety seat and slid the control switch to Summer. 'I could get used to this,' she said as the train glided away from the platform.

Star Seasons resembled a spinning top, with the seasonal zones sweeping out in a circle from the central spindle of the research facility. A curved, glassy dome rose high above them, dotted with lights which created seasonally-themed lighting effects as they cycled through standard day and night phases.

Through the window of the train, Spring flashed past. Bernice could see wild-flower meadows begging to be strolled through and picnicked in. Waterfalls splashed past rocky outcrops, and the sky was a warm yellowy-blue with a permanent hint of rainbow. Every now and then, Bernice saw other guests sitting in the themed bars, but they were few and far between. The facilities must be closely monitored to make sure that the privileged guests didn't bump into each other, she decided. It wouldn't feel exclusive if it was crowded.

'I know it's all fake, but it's still beautiful,' sighed Ruth, gazing at an artfully weathered signpost showing the way to the hiking area and rustic cookery barn. 'So, what does Bil research anyway?'

'Words,' said Bernice. 'He's an etymologist. His field is diachronic linguistics, but his focus at the moment is on the progress of language change.'

Ruth glanced at Jack. Jack was staring out of the window, ignoring their conversation. Spring had faded almost imperceptibly into Summer, and the train was running smoothly past the ballooning centre and waterslide park which curved alongside a heart-stoppingly beautiful beach dotted with tropical trees.

'But what does he actually *do*?' pressed Ruth. 'Seriously. I need to know. I want to work here.'

'You can't just decide to apply for an academic job,' said Bernice. 'There's all sorts of qualifications you need and you have to... you know... work your way up the ladder, write research papers, get published. That sort of thing. *Bil* is researching the increase of pleasure-based derivational morphology in a low-stress environment.'

Jack rolled his eyes, unable to continue his pretence of not listening. 'Which means...?'

'He's finding out whether or not people, er, invent new words when they're *really* enjoying themselves,' said Bernice, sheepishly. 'But that's just for the tourists. Other than that, he's got a long-standing interest in inter-planetary language comparison...' She trailed off, aware that she had lost her audience.

Bernice had met Bil on an archaeological expedition she was leading, more years ago that she cared to remember. He'd been called in when she needed a language expert to translate a set of giant runes in one of the underground chambers on Salva Noctra. When the chamber's wall collapsed, the two of them had been trapped inside for three weeks. Bernice looked back on it rather fondly. They'd been in no danger. The chamber they were stuck in was huge, the air supply plentiful, and they knew that help was on its way. Besides, their shuttle had been trapped with them, so they had lighting, food, water, bunkbeds and a working toilet. Possibly the quarters were a little cramped, but they had passed the time working and chatting. Bernice had really enjoyed regaling Bil with stories of her past adventures every evening. In a funny way, she'd been a little sad when they were finally rescued. It had all been a bit like a camping trip.

The carpets of the corridors in Summer were a verdant green with bright red flowers dotted here and there. The vents in the walls wafted out the calming scent of roses, mixed with the sounds of birdsong and the occasional buzz of a bee. A soft breeze lifted the warmth around them, and Ruth slowed her steps as she looked for signs to the central tower. 'Benny,' she said. 'Can you tell Bil we'll all have to stay here for at least a month while you write some poems? Please?'

'We'll see,' said Bernice, grimly. It wasn't that she begrudged her friend a holiday – she'd love for Ruth to get a bit of down-time, and she had to admit that this place was incredible – but the poetry-writing part of the agreement was weighing on her mind a little.

As they entered the central tower, the environment around them became more formal. The lazy outdoor sounds faded and the carpet's pattern morphed into purple and gold squares. A gentle stream of jazz from the speakers replaced the soothing sounds of nature, and ornate plaques affixed to office doors offered the visitor the choice of speaking to such luminaries as the 'Deputy Manager (Aestival)' or 'Wetroom Secretary (Pools).'

Yet no-one seemed to be about. The tower was as quiet as the rest of the holiday platform and even the reception desk was empty, leaving Bernice to locate and identify the riser by herself. She stepped on, followed by Ruth and Jack, and sat on an ornate bench, trying not to look at her reflection in the huge, sparkling mirror that covered the walls and ceiling. It made her feel self-conscious. Ruth gazed about her in undisguised awe, but Jack fiddled with the buckles on his shoes, nonchalant in the face of conspicuous luxury.

Heading for the sixteenth floor, however, it was hard not to notice that the deep purples slid into less exotic tones of brown and orange the further they travelled away from the operational offices of Star Seasons Leisure. By the time they reached the sixteenth floor, and Star Seasons Research, the walls were a muted grey and the muzak had stopped altogether.

There was still no-one in sight, so Bernice consulted a wallscreen full of flickering names and numbers.

'Here we go,' she said, cheerfully. 'Prof. B.B. Gloap. Room 23. That should be just over... here!'

'I bet he's not in,' said Ruth, enviously. 'I wouldn't be. I'd be on the beach in Summer.'

'Is that what you'd say in an interview?' asked Bernice. 'Because I don't think you'd get the job.'

'I'm just saying,' said Ruth, 'that of all the places in the universe to work, I think I've found the perfect one.'

'We *know*,' said Jack. 'We get it. When we meet Benny's little friend, he'll be so happy with his lot he'll have painted his head pink, but...'

He stopped. The door to Bil's office was slightly ajar and from behind it came the sound of a man crying.

A recent poll of 16-24 year-olds on Altan revealed that 88% had heard of Star Seasons. Of these, only 60% were aware of the onboard research station. 92% of the people asked reported that the swimming pools were the first thing they thought of when the words 'Star Seasons' were mentioned.

The Altan Journal of Poll Data Vol 68
Altan World Gov Group

CHAPTER FOUR

BIL'S OFFICE

It took Ruth a while to locate a server and procure a hot, sweet drink. By the time she had made her way back to the office, her dress was covered in tiny flecks of Star Seasons Creamer, and Bil was looking a little less miserable. Jack was sprawled in one of the high-backed chairs near the office door, and Bernice was examining the tiny words and images that filled the wallscreen behind the desk.

Bil had taken off his large, blue-rimmed glasses and was rubbing them on his jumper, smearing them with little yellow fibres. Ruth handed him the hot drink and he took it gratefully. His face was still blotchy from crying but he ventured a smile. He was completely bald, but looked younger than seventy, Ruth thought.

'Nice place you've got here,' she said. From the chair, Jack made an exasperated clicking noise.

'Oh dear me, yes,' agreed Bil. 'I'm very lucky.' He took a sip of his drink, then put the cup down on a stack of papers.

'I'd be so *happy* if I worked in a place like this...' said Ruth.

'Bil is upset because his niece is missing,' Jack cut in. 'Give it up, Ruth.'

'Sorry,' said Ruth.

Bil shook his head. 'Oh no, it's me who should be sorry that you've seen me like this,' he said. 'I'd only heard the news about Mina a minute or so before you arrived, you see. I'll be fine in a minute. What must you think of me?'

'Don't worry, Bil,' said Bernice. 'It's obvious that this is a bad time. We can come back and chat about poetry some other day.'

But Bil shook his head. 'That won't do, Bernice, no,' he said. 'We *must* talk about your book, it's very important. It's just that Mina was in *my* care and now she's lost. I can't think what's my brother going to say?'

'Do you suspect... *foul play*?' asked Jack, archly.

'No!' said Bil, looking even shakier than before. 'I hadn't even thought of that. Mina's a lovely girl. I'm sure that there's been some sort of accident or mistake.'

'Right,' said Bernice, pulling up a chair beside the old man and patting him on the arm. 'Here's what we're going to do. You start at the beginning and tell us everything that's happened. Then, we'll see if we can help you.'

'Great plan!' said Jack, leaping to his feet. 'You two can talk things through and I'll take our luggage to the guest rooms.' He looked at Bil expectantly. 'The, ahem, *luxury* rooms? Where we'll be staying?'

'Oh yes of course. Guest rooms,' said Bil, flustered. 'But I can't get you a room in any of the Seasons, if that's what you're hoping for. There are plenty here in Research. Will you be wanting three bedrooms or two?' He glanced up at Bernice. 'Or – er – one?'

'Three sounds perfect,' said Bernice. 'Come on, Bil. Neither of them is really my type, eh?'

Ruth pulled a face.

Bil turned his chair to face the wallscreen and muttered into a speaker at the bottom. The screen flashed up a sequence of numbers, and Bil looked apologetically at Jack.

'I've reserved rooms 301 to 303 for you,' he said. 'But I have to admit they're a little basic. You'll need a pass card to get in.'

Jack took the card and flashed a smile. 'I'm sure they're just divine,' he said. Something in his tone put Bernice instantly on her guard.

'Jack,' she said. 'Don't do anything I wouldn't... Don't do... anything.' She trailed off.

Jack winked at her as he bounced out of the room. 'Bags to rooms only, Nebula Scout's honour.'

Ruth turned her attention to the old man in the chair. He had picked up a photo cube from his desk and was fiddling with it, turning it over and over in his hands.

'You're all so kind,' Bil said, his eyes watering. 'I don't know where to begin.'

Ruth helped him out. 'Is that a picture of Mina?' she asked. 'How old is she?'

'She's twenty-three,' said Bil proudly. 'A beautiful young lady. But she's...' he was obviously choosing his words carefully,

'... a little wayward.' He passed the cube to Ruth. An image of a young girl grinned back at her, short, spiky orange hair clashing with her pale skin. Ruth wasn't exactly up-to-date with the fashions on Star Seasons, but she was pretty sure that wearing that much cheap jewellery could be read as an anti-authoritarian statement anywhere in the galaxy.

'Her father – my brother – felt that she was getting in with the wrong crowd back home, so she came here to do a bit of *work experience*.' Bil winced at the thought. 'Of course, she was only interested in the facilities – the pool, the cinema, that sort of thing. Oh dear me, she wasn't even interested in the Experimental Library, and she told the Dean to his face.' He paused. 'You know what the Dean's like.'

'No,' said Ruth.

'Ah, but you do,' said Bil with a small smile. 'Have you spoken to any of the servers since you've been here? Any of the interactive maps or wallscreens?'

'We chatted to a server at the monorail station.'

'There you go, then,' said Bil. 'When the Dean took the job, he programmed every one of the servers in Star Seasons with his own personality. The maps and wallscreens too.'

'The wallscreens talk?'

'I keep mine switched to silent.'

'He must have one hell of a personality,' said Bernice.

Bil laughed, a slightly nervous laugh. 'We're still getting used to him,' he said. 'Uphill – that was the old Dean – was a close friend of mine. Always keen on the linguistics programme, even though he was a scientist. Very interested in mice, you know?' He sighed sadly.

'What happened to him?' asked Bernice, suspiciously.

'Oh, he retired just over a year ago,' said Bil. 'He's living in a little village near Shining Lake, back on Altan. I told him about the new Dean's personality programmes. He laughed and laughed...'

'I'm sure he did,' said Bernice. She took the photo cube from Ruth and looked at Mina Gloap. 'But I think we've got a little off-topic.'

'Oh dear, yes we have,' said Bil, humbly. 'I'm sorry. I was telling you what happened to Mina, wasn't I? But there's not much to say. Professor Tsara turned up here, *en route* to Bubastis and Mina suddenly volunteered to join her team. Just like that.' Ruth sensed an edge to his voice. Jealousy, she decided, that someone else could motivate his niece where he had obviously failed to inspire her.

'Okay,' said Ruth, with a sigh. 'Who's Professor Tsara and what's so special about Bubastis?'

'It's the closest planet to Star Seasons,' said Bil. 'Famous for...'

'The Cats,' said Bernice.

'Of course, you'd know,' said Bil, with a faint smile. 'You always have all the facts at your fingertips.'

'To be fair,' said Bernice, 'there are only two things that any archaeologist knows about Bubastis, and "Oh, isn't that the remote planet with the massive stone Cats?" is the first one.'

'I suppose it is,' said Bil. 'Well, Neon Tsara is an archaeologist you know, Bernice, just like you. She gave a little talk before she left, telling us what she was going to be doing down there. I have to admit she made it sound remarkable but, oh dear me, she was a little hazy on the detail. She said that her expedition was going to change everything and usher in a new era of archaeology. Everyone in her team was about to win their place in the history books.'

'Wow,' said Ruth, impressed. Bernice frowned.

'That was about three weeks ago,' Bil continued. 'But Mina called me every day, just like she'd promised. She's a good girl really, you know. It's just her age that makes her act the way she does...' He took off his glasses and fiddled with the arm.

'Was she enjoying herself?' asked Bernice. 'What were they looking for?'

'She didn't really mention much about the work,' said Bil. 'Mostly she just talked about the other team members. Which boys she liked, which ones she didn't and, I'm sorry to say, who had drunk the most in the canteen in the evenings and been sick.'

'Sounds like Neon knows how to organise a great dig,' said Bernice.

'Oh dear,' said Bil. 'Well, maybe that's why Mina decided to join the team. She just wanted some company her own age.' He made a little fluttery gesture with his hands. 'I didn't see any reason to stop her,' he said. 'And then, last week, she didn't call.' Ruth handed the red-faced man a tissue, and he dabbed around the corners of his eyes before continuing. 'I left it for a while, didn't want to make a fuss. But I was so worried that the Dean got a little cross and convinced me to call Neon. *She* told me Mina had disappeared in the swamps five days ago.'

'And no-one had thought to tell you?' asked Ruth, shocked.

'She said they'd been busy,' said Bil. 'I'll show you the broadcast she sent the Dean last night. They're thick as thieves, Neon and the Dean. But then, he's always charming when people are offering financial contributions.' He muttered into the base of the wallscreen again and a video image appeared, showing a plump, attractive woman with curly pink hair. She was wearing a tight-fitting jumpsuit and bouncing up and down in excitement.

'Things have reached fever pitch here on Bubastis,' said the woman, throwing her arms about wildly. 'And we will soon be sharing our news with everyone. Right now, a group of journalists is heading towards Star Seasons. I would like Star Seasons to ferry them on to Bubastis for a very special press conference, if you please. It's time to highlight our amazing discovery. The Cats will reveal their secrets at last!'

Bernice stared hard at the screen. 'That's the woman in charge of the dig?' she asked. 'She seems a little... *amateurish*.'

'Yes,' said Bil.

'She looks nice to me,' said Ruth. 'She's just very enthusiastic. I'm sure she'll find Mina soon.'

'But that's just it,' said Bil, a little desperately. 'No-one's *looking*. Professor Tsara said that it wasn't a problem because she is sure the Cats are looking after her.'

There was a pause while Ruth digested this information. Was she missing something again? She could have sworn that the Cats were statues. 'The Cats,' she said, tentatively. 'They're made of... stone?'

'Yes,' said Bil. 'Oh dear, I think she might be a little bit crazy.'

'She's definitely crazy,' said Bernice. 'No search party? What is she thinking? Who doesn't look for a colleague lost in the swamps?'

'Neon Tsara doesn't,' said Bil. 'I'm sorry. I know it sounds silly but she's not at all easy to talk to, Bernice. I asked her questions, but she just changed the subject. Then after a while, I couldn't remember if she'd answered me or not.'

'Sounds like someone I know,' said Bernice. There was an awkward silence.

'How is Braxiatel?' asked Bil. 'Still your boss?'

'Oh, you know,' said Bernice vaguely.

'I always thought you had a rather lovely job on the Collection,' said Bil.

'Really?' said Bernice, looking very surprised. 'But you work *here*. You do get to use the facilities don't you?'

'Oh yes,' said Bil. 'Yes, we can visit the Seasons whenever we want. I'm rather partial to Autumn myself.'

Ruth nodded her head. Autumn had looked fun. But then, so had Summer, Winter and Spring. She wondered if this was the right time to enquire about job vacancies. Probably not, but then again, she might not get another chance. 'Excuse me asking, but how *did* you get the job here?' she said.

'Ah,' Bil said, thoughtfully. 'Well, it's a funny story really. Star Seasons wanted an entomologist, because we're so close to Bubastis.'

'As in *insect* expert?' said Bernice.

'Yes. But there was a spelling mistake, and they advertised for an etymologist. When I turned up, they were too embarrassed to admit they had made an error and so I got the job anyway. There are literally millions of bugs *not* being studied because I'm here looking at language acquisition.'

'There are a lot of insects on Bubastis?' asked Ruth.

'Ahem,' said Bernice, pointedly. 'Remember I said there were only two facts anyone knew about it? Don't think for a minute I didn't notice no-one asking me what the second one was. Well, it's *that*. Bubastis has a ridiculous amount of insect life. The bugs outnumber the people by about a zillion to one, some are really big and can talk.' She turned her attention back to Bil. 'Are you planning to go down and *make* them look for Mina?'

'I can't,' said Bil, suddenly avoiding Bernice's gaze. 'I'd have to use the Star Seasons transporter and I'm too afraid. I have a... phobia of cramped space shuttles.'

'But you used to travel all over the place,' said Bernice. 'What happened?'

Bil looked flustered and stared intently at the side of his desk. 'I didn't develop it until after our time on *Salva Noctra*,' he said finally.

'How strange,' said Bernice absently, then, 'Bil, let me go down to Bubastis for you. It's obvious that someone has to look for the girl.'

'Really?' said Bil. 'Oh my goodness, Bernice, would you?'

'Of course,' said Bernice.

'That would be wonderful.' He reached out and clasped Bernice's hand in his, then a look of agitation spread across his face. 'But your book...'

'Oh don't worry about the book,' said Bernice.

'You're sure?' whispered Bil. 'Bernice, you are a marvel.'

'I can see that there's a transporter scheduled to go in about half an hour,' said Bernice, gesturing at the wallscreen.

'Yes,' said Bil. 'It's the one taking all the journalists over for the press conference. Maybe you could say that you were a journalist, then there won't be any awkward questions?' He hesitated. 'It's just that I wouldn't want the Dean to think I was doing anything to harm Neon's expedition.'

The Dean was obviously a force to be reckoned with, thought Ruth, grimly. 'Shall I come?' she asked.

'I'd rather you stayed here and kept an eye on Jack,' said Bernice. 'I'm betting he took the bags to the rooms, then wandered off to get into trouble. Or a Jacuzzi. Or trouble in a Jacuzzi... Bil, do you have another pass card for Ruth?'

Bil fumbled around in the stacked paperwork on his desk then reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a card. 'I think I'll have to lend you mine,' he said. 'I seem to have given Jack my only spare.' Ruth noticed that his eyes were looking suspiciously wet again. He reached out for the photo cube and patted it. 'Oh, Bernice, please find her,' he said. 'Please find Mina.'

It was only when Bernice stepped on board the Star Seasons transporter, clutching her bag and the fake press-pass she kept for such occasions, that she looked back over the conversation she'd had with Bil and realised she may well have agreed to write a book of poetry for him.

What she hadn't actually said, but had really meant to, was that she believed herself to be pretty much incapable of writing a poem of any sort at all.

Inside the second cave, I found the broken pieces of several highly ornate bowls, dating back more than five thousand years. Each one was covered with an accomplished insect motif (see plates i to iv). The bowls are unlike anything used by the Bal. Indeed, the Bal have a strict taboo on the eating of insects, and the idea of using a bowl with such a design seemed to horrify them. When shown a reconstruction of the bowls, they unanimously shouted 'No Bal! No Bal!' which has led to our rather mischievous decision to name this 'other' race of bowl-users the Nobal.

The Nobal: My Part in the Discovery of a Lost Civilisation
Chilton Christopher

CHAPTER FIVE

EXPERIMENTAL LIBRARY

Ruth found the guest rooms easily. She opened 301 with Bil's pass card and took a quick look around at the beige bed, beige desk, beige wardrobe and – ooh! – avocado en-suite. The wallscreen told her that it was set to 'sunset beach' as soon as she entered, which made her jump. Strangely, even the synthetic whisper of waves crashing on the shore managed to be dull. Ruth somehow doubted this room was in any way similar to the suites that paying guests were offered.

'Got anything more lively?' she asked the wall, and was rewarded with a blast of screeching music. 'Actually, I'm fine with the beach,' she said hurriedly.

'Make your mind up, why don't you?' said the screen irritably, switching itself off. Ruth left the room to look for Jack.

The door to room 302 was unlocked, its wallscreen blank and silent, but with a message flashing in the bottom corner. 'R and B. Gone to Library. J.' That was a relief, thought Ruth. After all, how much trouble could he get up to in a library? She followed the signs back to the monorail and consulted the platform map.

'Library,' she said at the voice prompt.

'Are you interested in the Traditional Winter Library or the Experimental Library in Autumn?' asked the map, as two small areas on the plan pulsed greenly.

'What's the difference?' asked Ruth, although she had a pretty shrewd idea which one Jack would have chosen.

'The Traditional Library is modelled on a private collection from planet Earth circa 1900 CE, and boasts wood panelling, genuine paper books and log fires. Crumpet toasting in the history section occurs at 16.00 standard time every day,' said the map.

'And the other one?' asked Ruth.

'The Experimental Library is the way of the future,' said the map. 'Guests wishing to use this facility must produce a pass card that can be obtained at reception after filling in forms B6 and R7.'

'Thanks,' said Ruth. 'I've got Professor Bil Bil Gloap's card. Will that do?'

'Yes,' said the map.

'Great,' said Ruth, turning to go.

'You'll still have to sign a waiver,' said the map.

'That's fine,' said Ruth.

'Crumpet toasting only takes place in the *Traditional* Library,' the map added, spitefully.

'Goodbye,' said Ruth.

A server hurried over to summon a train for her.

'Autumn please,' she said, and the train whooshed away.

The word 'experimental' should have been a giveaway, but Ruth was still shocked at how little the Experimental Library looked like a library. Although not entirely sure what she was basing her assumptions on, she had expected a vast vaulted chamber full of books, with tall windows, busy scholars and quiet librarians.

She should have gone to Winter for the crumpets.

From the outside, the Library resembled a brown plastic igloo with no windows and one small door with a discreet doorbell. It was in the middle of a copse with trees that rustled in the

fake breeze, littering the ground with golden, brown and red leaves. Some had been raked into useful piles that dotted the pathway in case any passers-by wanted to have a joyful kick at them. A pair of holiday-makers, walking some kind of large bird on a lead that they had borrowed from the Autumn Pet Experience – *Own The Pet of Your Dream for an Hour, a Day or Your Entire Stay!* – nodded a polite hello to Ruth, then continued on their way, hardly glancing at the building.

It was not something built to amuse Star Seasons' millionaire clientele, Ruth thought, as she rang the bell.

On the inside, the Library was white and shiny-new. It smelled of floor cleaner. The door opened onto a circular waiting area with a large buzzing wallscreen behind a reception desk and six doors set in the walls on either side. The doors were blank, white and forbidding and there was a vague crackle of electricity in the air.

The librarian sitting at the front desk, dressed in the orange and brown uniform of Autumn, smiled up at Ruth brightly. 'Can I help you?' she asked, predictably.

'Yes,' said Ruth. 'I'm looking for my friend.'

The librarian turned her chair to face her wallscreen, which was similar to the one in Bil's office, but with more pictures of baby animals. 'There are three people in the Library at present,' she said. 'What is your friend's name?'

'Jack – er – Jack,' said Ruth, awkwardly.

'Jack Erjack?' said the librarian, then giggled. 'Just my joke.' Ruth attempted an encouraging laugh, but couldn't quite manage it. 'Oh dear,' said the librarian. 'Librarians aren't supposed to joke, are they? We used to laugh all the time when I was in Biology Research. But we were shut down.' She shrugged, flicking her eyes back to the screen. 'Anyway, no-one of first or last name Jack is currently using our facility.'

'Oh, right. Thanks,' said Ruth. That didn't mean a thing really though, she thought. Would he have used his real name? Come to think of it, how sure was she that *Jack* was even her friend's real name? 'You might have seen him?' she said. 'He's pretty noticeable, about so tall,' she gestured with her hand. 'Dark hair. Pointy ears. Sort of glowing eyes. Last time I saw him he was wearing these really bright purple shoes.'

'I'm sorry, I've only just started my shift,' said the librarian.

'Can I look around?' asked Ruth.

'Of course,' said the librarian, glancing at the pass card in Ruth's hand. Bil's pass card. Access all areas. 'Was there something in particular you were interested in?'

'No. Yes. I mean. I'm just interested. I've not been here before. This doesn't look like a library. Where are the books?'

'This is the *Experimental* Library,' said the librarian. 'Would you like to watch the presentation video? Actually, you have to whether you'd like to or not. It's required viewing for new users.' She stood up, her soft-soled shoes making no sound on the green carpet as she rounded the desk and took Ruth by the arm. With one hand she grabbed Bil's pass card and swiped it through a small machine at the side of the desk and with the other she guided Ruth towards one of the clean, white doors. Ruth muttered a small thank you, and went in.

Inside the cubicle, three rows of chairs provided seats for around two dozen people. Ruth was alone. She slid into a chair in the middle row and waited. As soon as she touched the seat, the back wall of the cubicle lit up with a bright fanfare and the words 'Welcome to the Experimental Library' in a mix of fonts that appeared desperate to suggest the old and the new sitting happily side-by-side. As the words faded, a man with a long, yellow beard strode across the screen towards Ruth. He was wearing a ferocious expression and a white three-piece suit that made him look old and angular. He leaned angrily towards her then took off his white top hat and bowed. The hat fuzzed crazily towards her eyes and she couldn't help flinching.

'What is... a book?' asked the man, gnomically. Ruth shrugged, inexplicably thinking of an antique 20th century book Bernice had shown her on Legion called *Zombies and Shit*. 'I'm the Dean of Star Seasons Research and I'm here to tell you a book is a waste of time!' He glared out of the screen and Ruth involuntarily shrank away again. 'A book is a resource,' he continued. 'It is a way of getting information into your head. But reading the words is so very wasteful. You waste time. You waste energy. You waste materials.' He paused, wagging his arms. 'We are planning to stop all that waste. Here, at the Experimental Library, we are taking the first steps towards creating a space where information can leap straight into your head... without the bother of reading a single word.'

The Dean stepped backwards and clicked his fingers. At once, the wall behind him erupted in a confusion of colours as words in a thousand different languages rushed towards Ruth. She shut her eyes to block out the images, then screamed as a hand tapped her on the shoulder.

She turned to see Jack looking amused.

'You scare easily,' he remarked, brightly-coloured words dashing across his face and upper arms. 'What on Kadept are you doing *here* instead of lounging around on a deck chair in Summer? You were ready to trade in your soul for a Star Seasons job, just so you could water-ski in your lunchbreak.'

'I was looking for you,' said Ruth.

'Need something specific?' demanded the man on the screen. 'With the Experimental Library you won't have to worry whether it's out of print or even if it is yet to be written, because...'

Jack reached behind Ruth's chair and snapped a switch that she hadn't known existed. The man in white disappeared leaving a peculiar afterimage on Ruth's eyes. 'I was watching that,' said Ruth.

'No you weren't,' said Jack. 'You were looking for me and I'm here! Anyway, you don't want to watch him, he's deluded. Time travel for books? Pah! Where's Benny?'

'She's gone to Bubastis to look for Mina,' said Ruth. 'How do you know what the Dean's shouting about if you didn't watch the presentation?'

'Oh, I watched it,' said Jack. 'But unlike you, I would have been *incredibly* relieved if someone had bounded in half way and saved me from the song and dance routine at the end.'

'I suppose you have a point.'

'And the soul of a poet?'

'Yes, that too,' Ruth sighed.

'Now we're getting somewhere,' said Jack.

'So is *that* what you were doing here?' asked Ruth innocently. 'Reading poetry?'

'Not this time,' said Jack. 'I was just looking around. And now I'm done, so we can go.' He held the door of the cubicle open for Ruth and followed her out.

The librarian swivelled in her chair to face them. 'I see you found your friend,' she said. 'Did you enjoy the presentation?'

Ruth mumbled a yes and took the light pen that the librarian was pushing into her hand.

'Fantastic. Can I ask you to sign just here, please?' She gestured to a space in the corner of the wallscreen.

Ruth signed and handed back the pen.

'Thank you. Now you can use the facility as you wish.'

'Great,' said Ruth, glancing at the rows of white doors. She didn't really want to any more. It all felt a bit too 'experimental' for her.

'One other thing,' said the librarian, running a finger along a flashing icon half way up the wallscreen. 'There's a message for you.'

'A message?' said Jack. 'From who?'

'The Star Seasons transporter,' said the librarian, 'currently on its way to Bubastis. It says: "Ruth! Hi! I was wondering if you could you do me a..." She stopped and squinted at the screen. 'A teensy-weensy-itty-bitty favour?'"

'Hey,' said Ruth. 'Can I read it myself please?'

With a hurt look, the librarian pressed the screen and a small plastic bud popped out into her hand. She handed it to Ruth who examined it carefully, waiting for a clue.

'It goes in your ear,' said Jack, making a show of rolling his eyes at the librarian, who gave him a tight-lipped smile in return. Ruth pressed the bud into her ear and Bernice's voice filled her head.

'Thing is Ruth, it turns out my theory was wrong. You know, the one that everyone only knows two facts about Bubastis? Seems like all the journos on board are a bit more clued up, and I'm *trying* to stay in character... but it's getting a bit tricky. Soooooo, I was wondering if you could just, you know, pop to the Star Seasons library and quickly find out a little bit more about the Ancient Bubastians and stuff. Then just send it over as soon as you can. Thanks, Ruth. You're a pal. When you contact me, you'll need to know my passenger number. It's 21. Easy to remember, same as my age. Ha, ha, ha. Speak soon.'

Ruth took the bud out of her ear and put it back on the librarian's desk. She suspected Bernice had been helping herself to the free drinks on board the transporter.

'Is it okay to use the Library now?' she said, reluctantly.

The librarian nodded.

Jack grinned. 'Benny set you a little task?' he said. 'If you need me, I'll be in the anti-grav squash courts.'

The librarian made a call and a man dressed in a similar Autumn uniform slipped from one of the white doors and took her place at the desk.

'I'll be with you all the way,' said the first librarian, taking Ruth's arm. 'We like to keep an eye on our new users. You know, just in case?' Ruth nodded, although she wasn't quite sure what she was agreeing to. She wished Jack had let her watch the end of the presentation.

The librarian steered her towards the white doors. 'Now,' she said. 'Which of our Experimental Services will you be needing? Book Recall or Resource Transfer?'

'Um,' said Ruth.

'Do you have a specific book that you are looking for?' asked the librarian kindly. Ruth shook her head. 'Book Recall then,' said the librarian. 'Resource Transfer only works once you have a title.' She ushered Ruth into the cubicle and closed the door behind them. The room was small and bare with curved walls. There were two seats in the centre, positioned to face each other. Between them, emerging from the floor in a frame, was a large glass screen. The librarian gestured for Ruth to sit down on one side, and sat on the other.

The glass made everything behind it look a slightly funny colour, Ruth thought. The librarian's uniform looked sickly. Her smile seemed sickly too.

'Here we go then,' said the librarian. 'Just talk to the screen to narrow down your choices as far as you can.' At this, several categories flashed up for Ruth to read.

'Art? Maths? Travel? History?' said the screen slowly.

'History, I think,' said Ruth, nervously.

'Confirmed,' said the screen, bringing up a new set of options. 'Military? Social? Economic? Ancient?'

'Just history,' said Ruth, a little helplessly. She looked for assistance from the librarian on the other side of the screen, but the other woman merely leaned back in her chair and made a little shrugging movement.

'Maybe... ancient history?' said Ruth. That sounded like Benny's sort of thing, she thought. Archaeological.

'Ancient history of which planet?' prompted the screen, flashing up a long list of names.

'Bubastis,' said Ruth, firmly.

'Confirmed.'

'That was easy, wasn't it?' said the librarian. 'Now, we just need to set the time parameters. Do you want to see books written in the last ten years, fifty years, one hundred...?'

'Oh, I don't know. Ten?' hazarded Ruth.

The librarian peered at the screen. 'I'm sorry. No books have been written on that subject in the last ten years.'

'Fifty, then,' said Ruth, a little despairingly. How had Jack managed to get off to the squash courts so easily?

'No,' said the librarian, sadly. 'Nothing there either.'

'Okay,' said Ruth, taking a deep breath. 'If I'm ever going to get out of here, how about you give me a list of every single book about Bubastis ever, in the history of the universe.'

'Past and future?' asked the screen.

'Why not?' said Ruth.

'Has form B6 been signed and witnessed?'

'Yes,' said the librarian. She gave a little wriggle on her seat as the screen blipped a couple of times and the words disappeared, replaced by an animated image of a set of books flying through space. 'Gosh, you're brave. How exciting!'

'Good,' said Ruth, slowly. 'Ah. What form did I sign?'

'The B6 liability waiver.' The librarian scanned Ruth's face. 'After you watched the presentation.'

'Oh yes,' said Ruth.

'To say that you understand that this is an *experimental* library and as such we take no responsibility for errors that occur in your research due to the *experimental* nature of the technology.'

'I thought it was to say I'd seen the video presentation.'

A black ear bud popped out of the screen and the librarian took it and handed it over. 'I'm afraid I can't stay with you for Resource Transfer,' she said. 'But I'll be waiting outside – just in case. Put the bud in your ear and follow the instructions. Good luck!'

'Right,' said Ruth, putting the bud in her ear. The door shut and she was alone in the room.

'Welcome to Resource Transfer,' said a spiteful sounding voice in her head. Ruth was pretty sure it was the Dean again. 'Please take time to choose the volume or volumes you wish to receive.'

Ruth was starting to feel heartily sick of this Library. 'No more choices or questions,' she said. 'I'll have the lot. Just, you know, go!'

She waited. Nothing seemed to be happening. Jack was right, she thought, it's not going to work. She was annoyed at wasting her time – especially after the Dean's recent spiel. Now she was going to have to go to the Winter Library to look up the information for Bernice instead. She stood up to leave. This Library was an experiment that had failed, she thought, unless... A faint pinging noise came from the bud deep in her ear, sending shivery reverberations around her head and down to the pit of her stomach. Unless... Oh hell.

Unless *she* was the experiment.

There are two issues facing someone who wishes to compile a list of all the words for 'fish' used by the tribes of Darcel.

The most important is, of course, to ask yourself if you want to count synonyms together and, if so, will you also count both of the members of noun-verb pairs as having the same meaning? The members are, technically speaking, separate lexemes since partly idiosyncratic morphological changes mark the verbal forms.

The second is, how will you get close enough to the Darcel tribe to record the synonyms? The tribes are extremely hostile and are covered in poisonous spikes, which make accurate darts.

Extended Travels in Language

Professor Bil Bil Gloap

CHAPTER SIX

UNDERGROUND

Ruth would probably not have been too surprised that Jack had not gone to the anti-grav squash courts like he'd said he would. But it may have come as more of a surprise if she'd found out that he hadn't paid a visit to the Sensual Cinema either, or to any of the other activity areas of Star Seasons that promised to act on the pleasure centres of the brain.

Instead, he had gone back to Professor Gloap's office.

Nothing he had seen in the Autumn Library had convinced Jack yet that this 'experiment' was anything more than pie in the sky, and perhaps that was enough to explain why the monorail tour had been so intriguingly unwilling to talk about it. Yet, despite his assurances to Ruth that it was all an impossibility, one thing still interested him: Bernice's first poetical work, simultaneously unwritten and read by Bil. Various scenarios presented themselves to Jack as he found his way back to the central research tower. *Could* there be some way that Bernice's old friend had read a publication from the future, or was he playing some kind of bizarre practical joke?

Bil's office door was ajar, but the room was empty. Jack crossed to the desk and sat down in Bil's large, white leather chair. It was worn and comfy. And *spinnny*. Jack swung round in a huge circle, admiring the wallscreen as it whizzed past, then grabbed on to the desk to stop himself, and spun himself again in the other direction.

'Oh dear me, hello.'

Jack suddenly saw Bil standing in the doorway, looking puzzled. His glasses were perched high on his head and his eyes were still looking a little bloodshot.

'Didn't you find your room?' asked Bil. 'I'm afraid Bernice has left for Bubastis.'

'Thank you, thank you, I found it,' enthused Jack. 'It's a lovely room. But if it had a chair like this it would be sublime.'

'I rather like it myself,' said Bil, humbly.

'But how rude of me,' said Jack. 'It's your chair. Would *you* like to sit in it?'

'No, no,' said Bil. 'That's fine. I get to sit in it every day. I'll just, er, sit here shall I?' He sat in one of the high-backed chairs by the door and looked at Jack expectantly.

'Excellent!' said Jack. 'Shall we begin?'

'Begin?'

'Ha, ha, ha!' Jack laughed loudly. 'I'm sorry, it felt like I was about to conduct an interview for a moment, you know?'

'I suppose so.'

'Actually though,' Jack leaned untidily across the desk, 'I do have a few questions to ask you.' He leaned back again. 'For Benny.'

'Of course, for Benny, of course,' said Bil, his face regaining some kind of composure. 'Fire away. Is it about the book? We didn't really get a chance to talk about it. This problem with Mina, it's crowding everything else out. But the book is important too, of course. In fact it's *vital* that Bernice writes it.' He paused and looked at Jack beseechingly. 'She will write it, won't she?'

'It *is* about the book, you're quite right,' said Jack, as if he was praising a star pupil. 'But I'm afraid you and I need to have a little chat before Benny can write anything. Don't worry, she's *always* happy for me to ask questions on her behalf you know. I'm her... agent.'

'Are you?' said Bil. 'My goodness, of course you are. Of course she has an agent. What a terribly good idea. I really can't stress how important it is...'

Jack waved a hand in the air dismissively. 'You have already. Let's leave it at that. Now, what have you told Benny so far?'

'Oh dear, not much,' said Bil. 'I didn't want to stick my oar in too much. I said that it's a short book of poetry, and that it will be published under the Star Seasons imprint as soon as she's finished it. There can be no editing, especially if we are to meet the deadline. Which we *must*,' he added.

'Ah yes, the deadline,' said Jack, nonchalantly. 'When was that again?'

'It's next Thursday,' said Bil, looking down at his lap nervously. 'I contacted Bernice as soon as I found out, but I am aware that it doesn't give her much time.'

'I wouldn't worry about that,' said Jack, soothingly. 'Benny's a fast writer you know. She *adores* poetry. And she's very excited about this project.'

'Oh my goodness,' said Bil. 'Well, that's a relief too. I was a bit worried that she... well... might say no. And that would have made things extremely tricky.'

'I'll say,' said Jack. 'But it seems to me that it's one of the nasty risks involved when you mess around with time. Now, how about you fill me in on all the details. I like to think of myself as a bit of a poet too, you know.' He flashed his teeth at Bil in a way that he thought showed bonhomie. 'What makes a nice etymologist like you commission a book of poetry from someone like *Benny*?'

Bil seemed pleased to have been asked. He moved over to the wallscreen and quietly spoke a few words into the receiver at the bottom. At once, the screen flooded with tiny rows of text and images in neat columns. 'This is my life's work,' he said proudly. 'Not the things I've been playing around with up here, the fripperies the Altan government wanted me to look into. My *real* life's work.' He took his glasses off his head and wiped the lenses nervously. 'I spent years researching languages throughout the galaxy, but the final proof for my theories remained elusive. Who would have guessed that, after spending so much time out in the field, I'd find what I needed on a holiday platform?'

'Thanks to the Experimental Library?'

'Yes,' said Bil, simply. 'It was a miracle.'

'Indeed,' said Jack. 'So, you just popped in and asked for a copy of your published thesis from the future?'

'Oh dear me, no,' said Bil. He put a hand to his head as he thought about it, then smiled shyly. 'But what a clever thought. You're obviously a smart one, Jack. Would that have worked? The Library's still very much what it says – experimental.'

Jack leaned back in the swivel chair and put his hands behind his head. 'Tell me about the Library,' he said.

'It's the Dean's pet project,' Bil laughed nervously. 'I think, if he had it his way, the whole of the research facility would be working on it. Actually,' he leaned in closer. 'Most of us already are. Departments have been closed down left, right and centre and their funds diverted to the Library. And it's not just money from Star Seasons Research. He's using money that should have gone to Star Seasons Leisure. I've heard Leisure staff say that the only way to keep hold of your job here...'

'On this lovely cushy holiday platform,' said Jack.

'... is to get involved in the Library,' said Bil.

'Are *you* involved?' asked Jack.

'Well, yes, I suppose I am,' Bil said. 'The Dean made me his Deputy, you see. I handle most of the day-to-day running of Star Seasons Research, because he's far too busy with the Library.'

'Fun,' said Jack, languidly.

'The Library is a very *exciting* project,' said Bil.

'Oh, I've seen it.'

'You have? Of course, I'm sorry. It started small, you know. The Dean wanted to construct the best library he could – every book, every paper ever published would be available through a helpful user interface. If you said you were interested in something, the Library would suggest a book for you. But then, oh dear, the Dean got a bit bolder. "Why stop at all the books written so far?" he asked. "What about the books that have yet to be written? They should be available too!"'

'Well, yes,' said Jack, arching an eyebrow. 'It's hardly fair is it, for someone like yourself, working away on a research paper, then finding that the most useful resources haven't even been written yet...'

'Oh my goodness,' said Bil, grabbing his glasses off his head giving them a little shake. 'But that's exactly how the Dean explained it to me. He knew, of course, about my research. About how I needed the final proof! And so, when they wanted someone to try out the future capacities of the Library, he suggested I should be their guinea pig.'

'Oink,' said Jack.

'I won't pretend I wasn't a little scared, but the Dean was so persuasive, and it turns out that he was quite right, because now I have my proof!'

'Benny's book?'

'Benny's book.'

'That she hasn't written.'

'That she is *going* to write. When I saw her name on the cover, I could scarcely believe it. I saw how near we were to the date the book was published – is *going* to be published I mean – so I thought I'd get in touch and see how she was getting on. But when I found out she had no intention of writing it, I knew it was all down to me.' Bil's was getting excited. He stood up and started pacing the room, his breath coming in short, excited puffs. 'I had to commission the book myself!'

'Bil Bil, my dear fellow,' said Jack, standing up. 'Take a seat. Calm yourself. Has anyone else conjured up a future book with this miraculous machine?'

'Oh no,' said Bil, meekly allowing himself to be led back to his chair. 'The Dean wants to wait and see what happens with Bernice's book before he tries anything else.'

Jack's mind was racing. He patted the old man reassuringly on the shoulder while he tried to work out what to do. Bil certainly didn't seem to be bluffing. But the idea that the Experimental Library could actually work was ringing alarm bells. What would happen if Bernice didn't write the book? Some kind of mind-blowing time paradox you couldn't really think about without going cross-eyed, Jack thought grimly.

'You seem a little worried,' said Bil. 'Perhaps I could get you a nice, hot drink?'

'No, thank you,' said Jack. There was an uncomfortable silence, as Bil looked at his feet and Jack looked at the flickering wallscreen. Bil dragged his eyes up and met Jack's for a brief moment. Jack wondered if the old man had thought about the possible consequences of his actions. It seemed likely that the Dean had, why else would he be waiting to 'see what happened' with Bernice's book.

'Bil, what if Benny *doesn't* write the book?'

'I'd be very disappointed,' said Bil.

'Is that all?' asked Jack, incredulously. 'Okay, what if she writes a different book from the one you've read *because* you told her to write it?' He paused, aware that his eyes were glowing more than usual.

'Oh,' said Bil, who was starting to look more than a little alarmed. 'I don't know. I thought that whatever would be, would be. It's not really my field.'

'But if you've read a book that will never exist, it could be dangerous. Time doesn't like things like that.'

Bil made a little gulping noise in the back of his throat. His hands clutched at the desk, his knuckles white. 'Dangerous... for me?' he asked.

'Certainly *you*,' said Jack. 'Maybe you *and* Benny. Or, you know, you, Benny, Star Seasons, and the whole universe as we know it.'

'Wait, no, wait,' said Bil, standing up and pointing at a small section of the wallscreen. 'This is Bernice's book right here. I saved it. Bernice can copy it out when she gets back, then we can publish. Would you like to have a look?'

'Oh, I'm not looking at that,' said Jack, getting smoothly to his feet. 'I don't want any potentially unstable future book knowledge in *my* head. But thank you so much for your time.'

'You're going?' asked Bil, rubbing the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. 'Will you make sure Bernice writes the book?'

Honestly, thought Jack testily. The old man was starting to get on his nerves. 'Find your niece *and* write a book for you at the same time?' he asked. 'Have you never thought that Benny has better things to do?' Then he winked to show that he was only joking. 'Don't worry,' he added kindly. 'She doesn't. It's all in a day's work. Really.' And he shut the office door behind him with a gentle click.

Jack looked at himself in the shiny silver-mirrored panel outside the riser. Really, he thought, he was looking particularly handsome today. His ears were exceptionally pointy, and as for his chin – perfection. His reflection, distorted by the buttons in the panel raised an eyebrow. So what should he do now?

He toyed with the idea of calling Irving to ask for advice, then decided against it. After all, there was still the strong possibility that the whole thing was bunkum. Smoke and mirrors. No, he would try to get to the bottom of it himself first. He'd taken a look from the outside, and seen that the Library was all bossy librarians and shiny white cubicles. But what was it like behind the scenes? His reflection shrugged, and Jack patted it on the cheek.

'There's only one way to find out, Jack my lad,' he said.

And he set off for Autumn again.

The colourful leaves crunched underfoot as Jack circled the brown igloo that housed the Experimental Library. Away from the path, hidden in the trees was what he was looking for. A trapdoor with the words 'Danger! Keep Out!' written on it and a shiny code lock holding it tightly closed.

Jack crouched down to take a better look. 'Oh, I *love* these,' he murmured, pressing a few of the icons at random and listening to the satisfying beeps that were inaudible to the human ear. 'When I was growing up, one of my *favourite* toys was my intergalactic code breaker. Now let me listen. One little tap here, and one here... Ooh, that makes you a Violet Sequel combination,' he said smugly. 'My favourite.' He punched in the correct sequence of icons and waited for the lock to pop.

The trapdoor opened onto a circular shaft with a sturdy ladder set in the wall. Jack clambered over the edge and climbed down a few rungs. As he did, orange lights in the walls clicked on to help him see. The tiled walls were clean and shiny, and Jack guessed that this tunnel was often in use. He should probably have an excuse handy in case he bumped into a maintenance engineer or technician.

He reached the bottom and found a short tunnel heading under the Library and ending in a heavy door with another code lock. 'Again? You're too kind,' said Jack, tapping in the code and opening the door. At once, he could feel the heaviness of the air in the room beyond, pulsing with energy. Light flickered from the screens that took up three of the four walls, each one in continual motion, throwing up sequences of letters, shapes and numbers.

In the centre of the room was a table displaying a golden tray the size of a dinner plate, covered with a glass dome. On the plate was a tiny marble-sized ball, pulsing red and orange. As Jack got closer, he felt the hairs on his arms stand up on end and could see that the ball was vibrating at an incredible speed.

'What are you?' Jack asked. 'You look *beautiful*.' He grinned and lifted up the dome to take a closer look. The ball was describing tiny figures of eight, with movements so small and rapid that they were almost imperceptible and Jack suddenly had a tremendous urge to touch it.

'But that would be foolish,' he said, 'I wouldn't want a friction burn.' Without the glass dome to contain it, the ticklish electrical feeling in the room was increasing. Jack could feel it melting up and down his spine. He gasped. 'But then again,' he whispered 'you're so pretty...' He put out a hand towards the ball, letting it hover above it, flexing his fingers in indecision.

There was a sudden surge of noise from the wallscreens, as they began to scroll faster and faster. Jack spun round and tried to work out what was happening. At the bottom of all three screens a red light was winking on and off quickly. 'What is it?' asked Jack. There was no answer. He dashed over to the closest screen and put his mouth close to the receiver at the bottom. 'What's going on?'

'The future retrieval system is about to be accessed,' replied the wallscreen. 'Vacate the chamber immediately and return to ground level or your safety cannot be assured.'

'Hold your horses,' said Jack. 'I can't vacate immediately, it will take a minute or so to work the combination locks.'

'You have twelve seconds,' replied the wallscreen, in an irritated tone. 'Star Seasons clearly advises that personnel should only access this subchamber after Library hours and cannot be held responsible.'

'Thanks for nothing,' said Jack.

'Eight seconds,' said the wallscreen, smugly. 'You are likely to be vapourised.'

Jack glanced wildly around the chamber at the chattering screens and the vibrating ball on its plate, and did the only thing he could think of. He grabbed the ball. It fizzed in his hand, burning him and giving off a smell of rubber. At once, the wallscreens stopped moving, the numbers frozen mid-calculation. He quickly dropped the ball onto the table with a shaky, relieved sigh.

'The Future Retrieval Device has been removed,' said the wallscreen. 'Please replace it immediately.'

'Uh – *no*,' said Jack.

'The Library cannot function properly without the Future Retrieval Device,' said the wallscreen plaintively. 'If you do not replace it, I will have to sound the alarm.'

'Oh, don't do that,' said Jack, backing towards the door.

'You have a count of five to replace it, and then I will sound the alarm,' said the screen. 'One... two... three...'

Overhead a siren screamed and a harsh red light started to flash.

'That was a count of three,' protested Jack, clicking through the icons on the lock desperately. 'You're not playing fair!'

'Get over it, thief,' said the wallscreen.

Jack yanked the first door open and glanced back at the table. Slowly but surely, the ball was rolling towards its original position on the golden plate, as if it was being pulled by an invisible magnet.

'Why are you doing that?' he shouted above the blaring noise of the alarm.

'If you won't replace the Future Retrieval Device, then I will have to do it myself,' said the screen, tartly.

‘And vapourise me in the corridor? I don’t think so,’ said Jack, furiously. He sprang towards the ball, moving inexorably towards its initial position, grabbed it and dropped it in his pocket. There was a scorching noise and his pocket vibrated furiously. ‘See ya!’

Jack scrambled up the ladder and out into Autumn. The shiny soles of his new shoes slipped in the leaves, but he didn’t stop running until he was out of the woods, then he slowed to a casual, less suspicious saunter.

What are you going to do now, Jack? he asked himself.

Find Ruth, get Benny, clear out, his brain told him firmly.

Or, give back the ball and apologise, suggested a different part of his brain. *Then you can relax and use the Jacuzzi.*

Shut up, said the first part, *there’s no Jacuzzi for you now. There’s blaring alarms and stern faces and breaking-and-entering charges. Not to mention accusations and recriminations and possible incarcerations.*

No-one stopped to ask Jack where he was going as he entered the research tower. Ignoring the riser, he went straight for the stairs, bounding up them two at a time. Jack was good at stairs. Nevertheless, he was panting as he reached the door to floor sixteen and yanked it open. In his pocket, the marble-sized ball’s vibrations were slowing down. He walked quickly along an interminable corridor, turned left at the drinks machine, and passed a hideous portrait of the Dean of Star Seasons.

‘Ruth!’ he whispered, rattling at the handles of doors 300, 301 and 302 in turn. He heard a groan and pushed at the central door. ‘It’s time to go!’

Room 301 was dark and he could just make out a figure bunched up in the blankets on the bed in the middle of the room.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked.

‘Jack?’ said Ruth, groggily, sitting up in bed and grimacing. She rubbed her head slowly. ‘I was just having a little rest. You woke me up. Actually, I feel a bit sick.’

Jack grabbed Ruth by the hand and jerked her upright. ‘No time for that, Ruthie babes,’ he said, pulling away the bedclothes and handing over her shoes. ‘We need to get to the shuttle. Now.’

Day Five: Despite being at the mercy of a vicious storm of flying monsters, I measured the various lengths of the fingers of Cats 3 to 5. I planned, of course, to compare them with the records I'd made for Cats 1 and 2, yet discovered, to my dismay, that the friendly 'Kee-ki-kip' noise that had been my constant companion all day long was the sound of a swarm of blue locusts eating their way through my research files.

The Diaries of Rintilda Vigintitres
ed. Telford Mark

CHAPTER SEVEN

PRESS TRANSPORTER

Bernice Summerfield was settling in rather nicely on the Star Seasons transporter. There were seats with thick, red seatbelts around the edges of the cabin to be used during take-off and landing, but the rest of the interior was designed to look like a plush bar. There were comfy couches, some rather strange-looking animals in fish tanks, and discreet lighting. Bernice felt quite at home.

Although it was a short flight, there were twelve servers, dressed in the orange and brown uniform of Autumn, ready to cater to the every need of the twenty-three bona fide journalists plus herself. One figure sat apart from the journalists, a man with a long, yellow beard. The Dean of Star Seasons Research, Bernice was informed. He was wearing an ill-fitting grey suit and a forbidding expression.

She looked at him curiously. He seemed to prefer the company of the servers to any of the people on board and had one of the androids by his side constantly, holding his drink for him and conversing quietly, although about what, Bernice could only guess. Whatever it was, it must have amused the Dean, because every now and then, he thumped the arm of his chair with his fist in delight and gave a short, barking laugh.

Bernice had decided to stay in her role as journalist for as long as possible, hoping it would give her more of an opportunity for snooping. She didn't want to turn up at Neon's door, all guns blazing, and demand to head up a search team until she'd worked out whether or not there was something fishy about Mina's disappearance.

There was an odd sort of party atmosphere among the passengers, she observed. The servers were handing round canapés and the journalist with the long legs was definitely flirting with the reporter in the queue for the toilet. She smiled lazily at the server who was refilling her glass for the third – fourth? – time, and the man sitting on her left raised his glass too. He was dressed casually in beige trousers and a white shirt but his eyes were hidden – inexplicably, for the lighting on the transporter was already fairly low – by a large pair of sunglasses perched on his long nose.

'Who did you say you worked for?' he asked.

'I didn't,' said Bernice, looking round. 'You?'

'Oh, I write for the Star Seasons rag,' he said. 'Octavius. Gregory Octavius.'

He was quite handsome in a messy-hair, crooked-smile sort of way, Bernice decided.

'Pleased to meet you Mr Octavius,' she said.

'Call me Gregory,' said the man. 'That's my name.'

'Okay, Gregory,' said Bernice, rolling the 'r' sound in a way that she hoped was cute, then instantly regretted. 'You can call me Benny. I'm freelance. And an archaeologist. A freelance archaeologist. And writer. Don't forget writer! I'm writing a book.'

'Are you?' Gregory looked amused. 'What sort of a book are you writing?'

'It's a book of poetry,' said Bernice.

'Poetry?' said Gregory, looking very hard at Bernice. She became suddenly aware of exactly how crumpled her clothes were. 'Well, I'd be very interested to hear more about that, Benny. Maybe after the press conference we can have a drink back on Star Seasons and you can tell me all about it. You're staying there?'

'Temporarily,' said Bernice.

'So this book is being published with one of the classier star presses I imagine?' said Gregory. 'Let me guess. Red Door? Doplins? Not one of those commercial presses on Altan?'

'It's for Star Seasons actually,' said Bernice, trying to keep her tone light. 'I've been commissioned by one of the professors. It's...' she trailed off.

'It's...?' prompted Gregory.

Bernice sighed and gave up. 'Look, I only mentioned it so I'd look interesting. But the thing is, I'm pretty interesting anyway. I'm not sure writing poetry would make me much more interesting in fact, so... What?'

Gregory was laughing. 'I've made you feel awkward, I'm sorry. I'm sure there are lots of other things we can talk about. But first I need a little closure. *Have* you actually written a book of poetry?'

'I've written it in the future,' ventured Bernice.

'Right,' said Gregory and winked. 'I know the feeling. Consider the subject closed.'

The passengers returned to the side seats and fastened their belts as the transporter landed. Bernice looked for Gregory as they waited for the linking tunnel to be connected, but she couldn't see him. Probably in the toilet, she thought. Even attractive male journalists have to go sometimes.

'Why are we using a linking tunnel?' she asked the young-looking man beside her, with a face covered in freckles. 'I thought they were only needed when the atmosphere was hostile.'

'Oh, it's definitely hostile.' The man looked very nervous. 'Bubastis has the highest proportion of insect life on any known planet. As in, you know, one hundred per cent. We'll be the only mammals there.'

'Oh yes, of course,' said Bernice. 'Everyone knows that, right? That's one of the two things! Big stone Cats, lots of insects. But they're not dangerous insects, are they? Just a bit annoying and buzzy.'

'I don't know,' said the freckled man. 'I'm a little afraid of insects.'

Really he was very young, thought Bernice, sympathetically. 'I'm sure there are far worse planets than Bubastis for insects,' she lied. 'Which paper do you work for?'

'*Star Seasons Today*,' he said, rubbing his nose. 'Nothing flash.'

'Ah, so you must know Gregory Octavius,' said Bernice, feeling pleased.

The man shook his head.

'But he said he worked on the *Star Seasons* paper,' said Bernice. 'He was just here a moment ago.'

'Well, *Star Seasons Today* is the only *Star Seasons* paper,' said the freckled man irritably. 'And believe me, I'd know if there was an Octavius on the team, because I am exactly half of the team. The designer left to work in the Autumn Library last week. There's only the editor and me left.'

'Well, that's odd,' said Bernice. 'Maybe he was joking. Or I heard the name wrong. That's probably it.'

'Probably,' said the man miserably, then, 'Oooh.'

The doors to the linking tunnel opened and from behind the opaque covers a loud buzzing and chirping could be heard.

'Don't worry,' said Bernice. 'There won't be any insects in the linking tunnel, I'm sure. Coming?' She stood up and joined the people heading towards the tunnel.

The man shook his head, planted to his seat, pointing in horror.

The blue creature that had appeared at the tunnel entrance was about the height of a human, but thanks only to the length of its thin, furred antennae. Without them it would only have come up to Bernice's knee. It was standing upright, balanced on the bottom two of its six

legs which seemed sturdier than the others. It had a huge number of eyes set in pairs in a circle around its head. Its body – thorax? abdomen? Bernice prodded her brain for the right terminology – was covered in patches of hard shell, covering softer, pink scales. Large hairs stuck out from the gaps between the plates and four thin, peeling grey-coloured wings were flattened uncomfortably against its back.

The freckled man at Bernice's side whimpered.

One of the servers made an irritated coughing noise to get everyone's attention. 'Excuse me,' it said loudly. 'Can I get your attention please? Just for a moment.' The passengers shuffled quietly and stopped whispering to each other. 'The linking tunnel will take us straight into Bright Blessings compound. But before we leave the transporter, the Bal Ambassador would like to say a few words.'

The creature's mouth was so tightly crammed with sharp, needle-thin teeth that Bernice wondered if it would be able to get any words out at all.

She watched, fascinated, as it made a clicking sound by rubbing the top two of its legs together, then began to speak in a reedy voice. It didn't open its mouth and the breath whistled through thousands of teeth creating a hiss, like static.

'Ambassador Grey Line,' said the Bal. 'Offers apologies.'

There was a short silence as the Bal scraped its wings together nervously. It used one of its legs to scratch off a patch of skin near its shoulder and ate it.

'The Ambassador means to say, please excuse the shedding,' clarified the server with an impatient sigh. 'The Ambassador is here to welcome you to Bubastis, and wants to ensure that you've all read the Galactic Standard Translation of the Bal Rule Book before you leave the ship.' The server's silvery eyes multiplied suddenly across its face, matching the numerous eyes of the insect, as it attempted to frown at every single journalist in the room at once. 'Which of course you *have*,' it said sternly.

'Umm,' muttered about half of the passengers dutifully.

'Have we?' asked Bernice.

'Of course we haven't,' muttered a woman in front of her. A badge pinned to her shirt read: *Bexx Branagh. Reporter Extraordinaire*. 'No-one has. It's long and boring. It's just the local custom to ask. You know, like when people say "How are you?" and you say "Fine thanks" even if your dog died. Just nod like everyone else or we'll never get off this transporter.'

The server at the front escorted the creature back through the linking tunnel while the passengers bustled into a messy line behind them.

Bernice turned to the woman again. 'I'm glad we've met the Ambassador,' she said, conversationally. 'I was wondering what a Bubastian looked like.'

'When referring to the inhabitants of the planet, my paper's style guide chooses the less widespread "Bal" over "Bubastian",' said the woman. 'We don't want to offend anyone by using a term perceived to be a cultural imposition. It is *rude*.'

'Oh yes,' said Bernice, smiling sweetly. 'Well I'm sure that's something you know a lot about.' And she pushed her way to the front of the line.

In brief, after taking into consideration the similarities between the slender fingers of the Bubastian Cats and the intricate bone fishing nets created by the prehistoric tribes of Altan, I would tentatively offer the following hypothesis: That in many ways the Cat's fingers resemble these nets and were undoubtedly used for the purposes of catching smaller animals; most likely insects of some kind.

The fact that the intricate fishing nets created by the prehistoric tribes of Altan are often overlooked as an area of study is obviously no help to a wider understanding of this theory, although one that I hope to correct as soon as I get funding to publish my latest research document: Intricate Fishing Nets Created By The Prehistoric Tribes Of Altan.

Why You Should Fund Lara Purdey's latest work, 'Intricate Fishing Nets Created By The Prehistoric Tribes Of Altan': A Funding Proposal

Lara Purdey

CHAPTER EIGHT

RUTH'S BRAIN

Ruth sat slumped in the seat of Brax's shuttle, watching limply as Jack piloted them away from Star Seasons. From space, the holiday platform looked like a jewel hanging in the darkness, gently rotating and flashing its seasonal lights.

'Are we going to see Benny?' she asked, eventually. Her voice sounded thick in her head and she swallowed and tried to sit up straight.

'That's the plan,' said Jack. 'We'll pick her up and dash back to Legion lickety-split.' He took a quick, nervous look at the scanner.

'Okay,' said Ruth slowly. 'So what did you do?'

'I'm sorry?' Jack's face took on an expression of acute innocence.

'Well, one minute we were all set for anti-grav squash and exotic saunas in the fake mountains and the next...' She gestured around the ship. 'Same old, same old.'

'You know, I'm very fond of this ship,' said Jack. 'It reminds me of my mother.'

'Jack.'

'All right, so it doesn't remind me of my mother. But this steering system is pretty similar to my cousin Coba's shuttle-drive.'

'Fine,' Ruth sat back in her chair. 'Whatever. Something's up. You can tell me later. I really don't feel all that great.'

'Well, to tell you the truth, Ruth – Ha! The Truth Ruth! – you don't *look* all that hot either.'

'Thanks.'

'Don't mention it,' Jack said and glanced into the scanner again. Did he seem more nervy than usual? wondered Ruth. Maybe it was just that she was feeling so groggy.

'The Library was a little more intense than I'd expected,' she volunteered. 'But I now know everything you could possibly want to know about the ancient Bubastians.'

'The who?'

'The ancient Bubastians,' said Ruth. 'Benny asked me to find out a bit about them, remember?'

'They're the ones that built the Cats?' asked Jack.

'Nobody knows who built the Cats,' said Ruth, surprised to find her head start to pound painfully as the words tumbled from her mouth, 'although many theories have been proposed by scholars. A popular view is the one propounded by DG Waithwrite, that a visiting race from Altan built them as a memorial to their pets but this... Ouch.' She stopped talking with an effort, and pressed her fingers gently against her eyes. 'That is really, *really* weird.'

'Hm?' Jack's eyes were on the scanner again.

'Can you stop checking that scanner for one moment?' said Ruth, rubbing at her temples. 'Is someone following us?'

'Negatory,' said Jack. He turned to face her and put a hand behind one pointy ear. 'I'm listening.'

'Okay, so I seem to have loads of information about ancient Bubastis in my head,' said Ruth. 'As in, I know every single thing that has ever been or will be written on the subject.'

'Impressive,' said Jack. 'How much was there?'

'I don't know. It feels like a lot,' said Ruth frowning. 'It *hurts*. Ask me a question about the ancient Bubastians. Anything.'

'Did they have chest hair?' asked Jack.

'This is impossible to answer, as no remains have been found,' Ruth blurted. 'In fact, it is one of the most intriguing points of Bubastian history. For, although we know that a race quite separate to the modern-day Bal lived on Bubastis thousands of years ago, we have no idea what they looked like. The historian Rintilda Vigintitres refers to them as "The Mary Celestians" in honour of this, a reference to ancient Earth mythology.'

'Hm,' said Jack. 'You've swallowed the book, haven't you?'

'Not just *the* book,' said Ruth. 'Books. Plural. All the books. I have every book ever written about the Ancient Bubastians in my head. And that's not to mention the journals, articles, newspaper clippings...' She winced. 'Benny *will* be pleased.'

'Oh yes, she'll be absolutely thrilled to find that you're the universal authority on an ancient culture. She loves a challenge. What's it like to be an expert? Is it *very* dull?'

'It's painful,' said Ruth, rubbing her forehead. 'It's like the information hasn't quite had a chance to settle yet. I didn't know the answer to your question before I said it. It just came from nowhere. Um, try asking me the hair thing again.' She paused. 'I mean it. *Ask* me.'

'Did the Ancient Bubastians have chest hair?'

'No-one knows,' Ruth said. She was already tensed, waiting for the pain in her head, but this time none came. She smiled. 'Phew. That's better.'

'Yes, fact-blurting could get wearisome,' said Jack. 'Especially as your topic of choice is less than engaging.' He cocked his head to one side. 'So, Ruth the Truth, tell me. How d'we know these Ancient Bubastians existed if we've never found one?'

'One small settlement was discovered, dating back thousands of years.' Ruth put a hand over her mouth but carried on talking through her fingers. 'It predated any modern Bal settlement and all Bal history... Ugh! Jack, that was *mean*! I couldn't stop!'

'I forgot,' said Jack, his eyes flicking back to the scanner. 'What happens if you think of a question all by yourself in your head? Can you access the information that way?'

'Yes, I think so,' said Ruth. 'I don't want to try right now though. Whenever the information comes though it feels like it's pulling out all the nerves in my brain. It's horrible.'

'Doesn't sound great,' agreed Jack.

'But what's worse is that whatever I say, I get a strange feeling that it's not the whole story,' said Ruth. 'There's some information that is out of reach and sort of foggy. And that hurts even more.'

'Interesting,' drawled Jack. 'Maybe that's the more advanced stuff and you need some sort of password. Or...' he pulled a face, 'you've accidentally become guinea pig number two in Star Seasons' loony future books experiment.'

'This is my *brain* we're talking about, Jack,' said Ruth. 'I shouldn't need a password.' A light on the console flashed on and off. 'We're nearly at Bubastis I think. Are we going to need seatbelts this time?'

'Well,' said Jack, 'it's up to you, but the landing space is just a clearing near the compound. Bubastis doesn't go in for fancy-schmancy spaceports. Oh and Ruth, one more thing.' He grinned. 'What did the Ancient Bubastians eat?'

'It is widely believed,' said Ruth, 'that they ate a combination of marsh weeds and insects from the plentiful supply found in all areas of the planet. Jack, you utter *git*.'

'Just trying to help you assimilate.'

The Bubastians, or 'Bal', have a comparatively short life-cycle, and their 20 – 23rd years of life are referred to as 'years of sleep', which is to say, retirement. It is unheard of for any Bal to live beyond this.

I would argue that this substantiates their claim to have no knowledge about the creation of the Cats, for although these magnificent statues seem ancient to someone with a human lifespan, they must seem doubly out of reach to these insect natives, due to the multitude of generations which have come and gone between the Cats' creation and the present time.

Comparative Life Cycles: A Study (Vol 881: Memory Recall)

Lord Dom Sparke

CHAPTER NINE

MEDIA BUZZ

The linking tunnel travelled down from the transporter, and along the ground then opened into the compound via a hatch in the bottom of the canteen. One by one, the journalists climbed up, popping their heads through it like startled rabbits, remarking to each other what an adventure they were having.

Bernice still hadn't managed to locate Gregory and it was getting on her nerves. Somewhere on this planet there was a good-looking man who had *definitely* been flirting with her, and yet she was stuck in Bright Blessings' canteen with a load of tedious hacks and an over-sized bug.

She'd just had a message from Jack that he and Ruth were on their way. Whether this was a good thing or a bad thing she wasn't yet sure.

'Ruth can just send me whatever she found out,' she sent back. 'There's no need to come. My plan, such as it is, is to attend the press conference before I do anything else.'

'Oh no,' sent Jack. 'We're coming. Ruth has done a sterling job. You *have* to see this. Incidentally, who's down there with you? What's security like?'

'Security?' sent back Bernice, puzzled. 'I don't know. There are the servers who came with us on the transporter, I suppose. But it's not really a hostile planet, despite the nest of enormous ants I nearly trod on when I went to the loo. I don't think they need much in the way of security. I've only met one of the natives, but he seemed friendly enough. Why are you so interested in *security*, Jack?'

'No reason.'

The Star Seasons transporter had landed in the clearing next to the archaeologists' compound. Bright Blessings, as Neon Tsara herself had named it, consisted of a series of circular prefab huts on stilts that had been sunk deep into the marsh.

The largest hut was in the centre and housed the canteen they had arrived in. Ten doors were set at equal intervals around the edge of the room, each leading to a corridor that radiated outwards like the spokes of a wheel. At the end of each corridor was another circular hut. From above, the compound must look like an under-achieving spider's web, thought Bernice.

The central hut had been arranged for the press conference with chairs in lines facing a small stage. The kitchen area had been screened off and several tables and a pool table pushed to the edges of the room. Bernice noticed with amusement that although Bubastis was classified as a Class E (no-risk) planet for archaeologists, the huts were the type used on Class A (hostile) planets, with three tiers of window protection and double-thick walls. Someone must have thought there was a real danger of the insects annoying the team, Bernice thought, or perhaps they were just showing off. Splashing the cash.

The press milled around, taking drinks from the servers and talking to members of Neon's team. The latter were easy to spot, as they were all wearing brightly coloured T-shirts and vests with the words TEAM NEON emblazoned on the front and back. They were taking small groups of journalists on a guided tour of the complex. Bernice joined one tour led by a girl called Danni, a delicate-featured girl whose bosom swelled alarmingly under her tight hot-pink vest. She was wearing combat trousers and big black boots.

'Nice boots,' said Bernice.

'Steel toecaps,' said Danni, proudly.

'Useful,' said Bernice. 'Can I just ask you a couple of questions before we start. About a girl called...'

'Uh, sorry. Neon said there should only be questions at the end of the tour,' said Danni. 'Everybody ready to go?'

Bernice's group consisted of the entomophobic editor of *Star Seasons Today*, who looked uncomfortable and kept itching himself, and a female journalist from *Altan News* who couldn't seem to stop saying 'Oh, my gosh!'

The idea was starting to form in Bernice's head that the journalists who had been chosen to cover this story weren't exactly at the top of their game.

Danni led her group up and down each corridor in turn, tramping forwards and backwards as she showed them each of the satellite huts: two dormitories, two bathrooms, two workrooms and two storerooms. The last two huts, Professor Tsara's office and a private bedroom, were out of bounds. Neon was using them for an important pre press-conference conference with the Dean.

As they walked, Danni explained in minute detail about the engineering that had been used to erect these buildings in the marshy environment. When the group reached the last stop on the tour, Storeroom Two, everyone seemed glad that it was nearly over, paying little attention to the boxes of food, water, bags and trowels that were being pointed out.

There was a brief moment of excitement when the freckled man from *Star Seasons Today* noticed that the storerooms were numbered Two and Three and demanded to know if there were a secret Storeroom One hidden somewhere in the compound. Danni laughed and explained that Neon had just taken it upon herself to number them in that way for her own amusement.

'She's *ever* so funny,' said Danni. 'She calls the girls' dormitory Heaven and the boys' one Hell.'

Bernice looked out of the reinforced window of the storeroom. She couldn't see much through the bars, just a glimpse of boggy ground and the trunks of tall, thin trees. The glass was covered with the dying splats of flying insects, who hadn't worked out what they were flying into until it was too late. Then a large whirlwind of what looked like gnats blew past, obscuring everything from sight with their green wings.

'Where are the Cats?' asked Bernice.

'About a twenty minute walk that way,' said Danni, pointing into the distance. 'Hang on, the swarm's moving. You should be able to see the ears sticking over the trees.'

Bernice looked and could just about make out the tantalising view of the very tips of the ears of the closest Cat. She had a sudden urge to ditch the press conference and head off into the swamp to take a look at the Cats, which she dismissed quickly. Steady on, Bernice, she told herself, you're on a different sort of mission. Think about Mina.

It was getting dark outside. As the strip lights above her head began to click on automatically, a new sound could be heard through the thick glass, the chirrupy noise of night creatures just waking up. It mingled with the constant low-level buzzing that Bernice had already somehow become accustomed to.

'Why didn't you set up camp closer to the statues?' she asked, in exasperation. 'Don't the Bal like it?'

'Oh, the Bal don't mind,' laughed Danni. 'They act like the Cats aren't even there.' She shrugged and glanced at the clock on the wall. 'Tour's over. Everyone cool?'

With an effort, Bernice pulled her thoughts back to the job in hand. '*Cool* or not,' she said, 'you said we could have question time. And I want to ask you about Mina.'

'Mina?' said Danni.

‘Yes, Mina Gloop,’ said Bernice. ‘She was working here. There aren’t many of you, so you *must* know her. She’s missing.’

‘Mina?’ said Danni slowly, then, ‘Yes, of course I know *Mina*. Orangey hair, right? Rupert had a crush on her, when she first arrived, but then he made it up with Cindy again. Have you met Rupert? He’s the one with the all the little silver piercings in his neck. He’s *lovely*.’ Then she frowned. ‘But I don’t think she’s gone missing. Someone would have said, wouldn’t they?’

‘Can you remember when you last saw her?’ said Bernice.

‘No. Um. I don’t know,’ said Danni. ‘Have you asked Neon?’

‘I haven’t met Professor Tsara yet,’ said Bernice. ‘Incidentally, don’t you *mind* walking around with her name emblazoned on your chest?’

‘I’m totally into it,’ said Danni. ‘It looks professional, right?’ Before Bernice could answer, the lights overhead flashed on and off several times. ‘That’s Neon’s way of telling us all the press thingy’s about to start,’ she said, and started to stomp back down the corridor towards the canteen.

As Bernice followed, she decided that Mina’s disappearance must be due, at least in part, to the incompetence of the people around her. Team Neon was like a group of kids on a school trip, and as for Neon herself – well, she’d wait and see. But from what she’d seen on the screen in Bil’s room, their leader didn’t inspire much more in the way of confidence.

A portable wallscreen had been positioned beside the stage. The journalists in the canteen were no longer milling about, but had taken seats facing it, with the twelve servers from the transporter standing in a line at the back of the rows of chairs. The Bal Ambassador was nowhere to be seen.

She could see Ruth – and oh good, Gregory – sitting near the back of the room. ‘Any problems getting in?’ she asked, slipping into the empty chair next to her friend, while trying to subtly catch Gregory’s eye.

‘No, not at all,’ said Ruth. ‘Jack had some excuse all ready, but no-one even asked.’

‘Where *is* Jack?’

‘He wanted to wait on the shuttle. He’s acting a bit weird, if you ask me.’

‘Really-weird or Jack-weird?’

‘Well, it’s hard to tell. Maybe it’s just Jack.’

‘Fine,’ said Bernice. ‘Did you find out anything interesting about the Bal for me? Don’t worry if you didn’t. I felt a bit out of my depth when I sent you that message, but now we’re here, I can’t see anyone minding.’ She caught sight of Ruth’s face. ‘Not that I don’t appreciate you doing it,’ she added. She glanced around at the members of Team Neon. Some were lolling about on the furniture that had been pushed to the side of the room, others were standing in small groups, giggling and chatting to each other. They were behaving as if they were in a classroom waiting for the teacher to arrive.

Danni walked up to the front of the room and clapped her hands. The audience stopped talking and shuffled round to face her. She gave a fluttery wave to one of the Team Neon boys at the side of the room.

‘Hi everybody,’ said Danni. ‘Uh. I just wanted to say, thank you all for coming and please welcome Neon – er, Professor Tsara – to the stage!’

There was a smattering of applause from some of the journalists. Bernice kept her hands in her lap. ‘I never applaud at the start,’ she whispered to Ruth. ‘Only *after* I’ve heard what they’re going to say.’

The door behind the stage swung open with a dramatic thump, causing a yellow moth, who had been minding its own business on the ceiling above, to fly off with an odd screech. Neon

stood framed in the doorway, waving, as plump and pink-haired as she had seemed on Bil's wallscreen. Behind her, scowling heavily, was the Dean of Star Seasons Research.

'Hello everyone!' she said. 'Welcome to Bright Blessings. Have I got news for *you*!' She was wearing a dramatic black cape over a pale orange jumpsuit. Her whole body jiggled with the enthusiasm of her wave.

'How old do you think she is?' hissed Ruth, not taking her eyes off the woman as she bounded up onto the stage next to Danni. The Dean followed slowly, stroking his long beard.

'I'd guess forty,' said Bernice. 'But I'd also guess she's had work done to make me think that.'

'So welcome, everyone. Welcome,' said Neon holding out her arms to show that she included everyone in the room. 'Bright blessings to all of you. Today is a special day...' She took off her cape and placed it on the table beside her. 'And that's why I am wearing orange. A colour that shows I am sending and receiving love from the universe. Does everyone have a drink? Good. Then we can begin.'

She nodded at Danni who was holding a small remote control. Danni whispered into it and the portable wallscreen lit up with a picture of the Cats.

'Oh, my gosh,' came a voice from somewhere in the room.

'Behold, the five stone Cats of Bubastis,' said Neon. 'One of the greatest secrets of the universe, yet ignored by modern archaeology.' She leaned forward and put on a fake whisper. 'It is said that if you gaze deeply into their eyes, you see a mirror of your own soul. If you are angry, they seem angry, if you are calm, they are calm. When I first saw the Cats I saw... *mystery*.' She paused, a smug expression crossing her plump features. 'This, of course, reflected my *own* inner mystery. The Cats and I had such an instant bond that I knew at once I'd be able to really explore them, and discover things that no-one had found before.'

The picture on the wallscreen changed to show a close-up of one of the Cats' weathered, inscrutable faces.

'*Who* built the Cats?' demanded Neon.

Click. A new picture, showing the Cats in the distance.

'*Why* did they build them?'

Click. Another picture, showing the bug that dripped from the Cat's mouth.

'*How* did they build them?'

Click. Yet another, detailing the Cat's two rows of fingers.

'And *what* was with all these fingers?'

Team Neon laughed dutifully from the side of the room.

'These are questions that were asked for the first time – but left unanswered – over two hundred years ago,' continued Neon, 'when the much-maligned archaeologist Rintilda Vigintitres spent twelve days on Bubastis, camping alone in appalling conditions where she was continually bitten by beetles, scared by spiders and flown at by flies.' Neon chuckled appreciatively at her alliteration. 'Indeed, from the day she left the Cats until the day she died, she could not behold a butterfly without screaming...'

'It's true,' whispered Ruth, tapping the side of her head. 'It's all in her diary. Although I would say her style borders on the melodramatic.'

Bernice grimaced. She knew the sort of thing.

'I've read Rintilda's diaries over a hundred times,' Neon said emotionally, 'and my soul,' she thumped her chest, 'my soul was captured by the Cats and the awe they inspire.'

Click. Another picture appeared, this time showing Neon in a long, white dress gazing up – presumably in awe – at one of the Cats. Neon must have been fond of this image, as it did not change until the end of the presentation.

‘And so we are ready for the most important question of all,’ said Neon. ‘Why am I here?’ She looked around the room fulsomely. ‘Of course, there are many, *many* archaeological sites that resonate with me. I am determined to visit, commune with and uncover *all* their secrets. So what made me decide to start on Bubastis?’ Again, she looked round the room.

Surely she’s not actually expecting a reply, thought Bernice, disgusted by the woman’s emotional presentation style.

‘I’ll keep it simple,’ said Neon. ‘Does anyone have a favourite number?’

There was a certain amount of shuffling among the gathered journalists. If any of them did have a favourite number, they weren’t about to admit it.

‘Well then, let me ask you another question. What do I, Neon Tsara, have in common with the great, ancient Earth philosopher Bill Drummond, and with Eris, the goddess of Discord and Chaos?’

One of the journalists coughed. Bernice bit her lip to stop herself shouting out an incredibly rude answer. You’re meant to be undercover, Benny, she thought to herself firmly. That means *not* drawing attention to yourself.

‘It’s easy,’ said Neon with a wide smile. ‘You see, we all have a favourite number. Twenty-three.’

There was a sort of relieved sigh from the audience, happy that the riddle had been answered without their participation.

‘And,’ whispered Neon. ‘How many fingers do these beautiful stone Cats have?’

‘They have twenty-two,’ said the *reporter extraordinaire* Bernice had met earlier. Her tone was abrasive. ‘Eleven on each front paw. And normal cat’s paws at the back.’

‘Ah, that’s what most people would say,’ said Neon, tapping her nose with her finger. ‘But perhaps extra-ordinary people would look closer, you know?’ She looked round the room triumphantly.

Bernice could tell from the blank looks on the faces of her fellow audience members that they did *not* know.

‘While reading Rintilda Vigintitres’s grossly neglected and undervalued work, I found she had made an amazing discovery. Although four of the five Cats have twenty-two fingers, one of the Cats is a little different. An extra tiny sliver of stone in the top row of fingers on one paw makes its total finger count... twenty-three.’

One of the more excitable students started to clap. A few people joined in politely, but not enough to really get the applause going and it petered out.

‘When I read this, I knew that the Cat was sending a message directly to me.’ Neon gave a modest laugh. ‘You see, this magical number never appears anywhere in my life without a purpose. In fact, I have found that every important incident and event I experience is directly connected to the number twenty-three. I was born on the twenty-third day of the twenty-third month on Altan. My grandfather owns twenty-three moons which, one day, I will inherit. My mother was twenty-three when she met my father. I even married the twenty-third man who told me he loved me...’

‘Twenty-three, skidoo,’ murmured Bernice.

‘I’m sorry?’ murmured Ruth back.

‘It’s an old Earth term,’ said Bernice, quietly, ‘from America in the early part of the twentieth century. It means: “Get out while the going’s good.”’

‘You’re not getting any of this either then?’ asked Ruth. Bernice gave her head a little shake. ‘Oh good, I thought it was just me again.’

‘A bit of quiet at the back there, please?’ said Neon. Bernice and Ruth stared at the floor, each stifling a giggle.

‘Naturally, Rintilda Vigintitres did her best,’ Neon was saying. ‘But she had no access to any modern-day tools of the trade, so her methods were very limited. She analysed the stone that the Cats were made from, measured all their parts, catalogued them, dated them...’

‘Seems pretty standard archaeology to me,’ muttered Bernice. ‘Now or whenever.’

‘Although she counted the number of fingers, she did not comprehend their mystical significance,’ said Neon. ‘The message was not for her.’ She flashed a toothy smile at her students, who gave an impressed murmur. Bernice rolled her eyes. ‘And of course,’ Neon continued, ‘she didn’t have the advantage of... da-dah-da-dah...’

The picture on the wallscreen was replaced by the words SYMPATHETIC ARCHAEOLOGY and a curly logo that looked like a snake with a head at each end, biting its own stomach.

‘Sympathetic Archaeology – or Neon Archaeology as I sometimes think I should call it,’ said Neon with a smirk, ‘is the method I have developed to decipher the Cat’s message.’

There was another sycophantic cheer from Team Neon, making Bernice shudder as their leader launched into the story of how she had discovered sympathetic archaeology. The story was long, complicated and self-aggrandising, yet related in such a breathless, excitable way that it was hard to ignore. The listener was forced to listen hard in order to keep up with the torrent of wild leaps, self-congratulatory meanderings and general improbabilities.

As far as Bernice could tell, Neon had been looking for an ancient temple, deep in the jungle on a planet called Sarspun. Her path had been blocked by fearsome brambles, which not even the sharpest knife would cut. The only thing that would even make a mark was the claw-like thorn from a nearby tree.

So far, so whatever, thought Bernice. But there was more.

‘It was at this point that I realised that the problem was one of sympathy,’ said Neon, twiddling a strand of her pink hair in her fingers. ‘My *knives* were not in harmony with the planet, but the *thorn tree* resonated on the same wavelength as the brambles.’ She smiled encouragingly. ‘When we use inharmonious devices, such as computers, cameras, even measuring tapes from our world to investigate structures from other worlds, we strip them of their dignity. And though they *appear* to yield up their secrets, well... How much more would we find out if we could approach them in a more sympathetic way?’

Bernice caught sight of Ruth’s bewildered face and grinned.

‘Here on Bubastis, I have tested and honed my discovery,’ said Neon. ‘And it has offered powerful results. A simple sonar scan of the Cats reveals little. But take that sonar scanner, and replace its power source with the electrical current of powdered marsh flowers native to Bubastis and the response is... phenomenal.’ She stopped, letting a hush fall over the assembled people.

They were acting as though she was about to perform some kind of magic trick, Bernice thought in irritation.

‘The Cats contain a secret,’ continued Neon in a low voice as Bernice jiggled her leg impatiently. ‘And I mean that *literally*. The Cats are hollow, and there is something inside them. A personal message from the twenty-three fingered Cat to me.’

‘Oh, my gosh,’ said the girl from *Altan News*.

Suddenly, Bernice heard the scrape of chair legs as someone pushed their seat roughly back. A man’s voice shouted: ‘Sacrilege! This woman must be stopped!’ and everyone turned to look. Except Bernice, who instantly knew exactly who it was.

‘Octavius Gregory,’ said Neon, her voice dripping with disgust. ‘How did you find me?’

‘That doesn’t matter,’ said Gregory. ‘I’ve come to shut you down before it’s too late. I’m here to expose you as a thief, and to warn everyone that you are a dangerous woman.’ He wheeled round, throwing out his arms as he addressed the stunned journalists. ‘She *stole* the concept of sympathetic archaeology with intent to exploit and adulterate it!’

There was a dazed silence from the room as Neon took a deep breath and drew herself up to her full height. 'I'm so sorry, everyone,' she said finally. 'May I introduce you to my ex-husband?'

Q. What happens if Bal swallows insect by mistake? For example: while talking.

A. Is impossible. Mouth open all time but so full of teeth. Not even smallest insect slip through. Bul live on liquid diet. Next.

Several Questions You May Have Wanted To Ask About Altan And The Surrounding Planets

Gold Stripe Bal

CHAPTER TEN

STOREROOM TWO

All eyes in the room were on Gregory.

Bernice sighed sadly. Why am I always attracted to the loonies? she wondered.

Neon waved her long, manicured nails in his direction. 'Will someone please escort him back to the ship.'

'No-one's making me go anywhere until I've had my say,' said Gregory, staring directly at Neon. But Neon was looking past him, to the row of servers at the back of the room.

There was the noise of twelve sharp clicks.

'Duck,' said Bernice, sliding off her chair and crouching on the floor in a single, fluid movement. Ruth followed and the two of them huddled together, waiting for the sound of gunfire above them. None came. Most of the room had hardly moved, save to switch their astonished stares from Gregory to Bernice and Ruth. They had not identified the noise or even noticed that each of the twelve servers, previously standing quietly in attendance with their arms at their sides, now had a small handgun pointed at Gregory's head.

'Oh my god, Neon. Has it come to this?' asked Gregory. 'I just want to talk. I'm not *armed*.'

'Escort him back to the ship,' said Neon, averting her eyes as her voice trembled with emotion. One of the servers stepped forward and beckoned with the silvery gun. Every other person in the room was frozen: Bernice and Ruth on the floor, the journalists in their seats, the Dean on the stage next to Neon, his mouth open in surprise.

'All right,' snarled Gregory. 'I'll come with you. But if this is the way you treat a peaceful protest then you've strayed further from the *true* path than even I thought, Neon.'

'Please just go,' said Neon, refusing to meet his eyes. She held one hand up to her forehead as the server took Gregory by the arm and led him out of the door. 'I think this is the end of the presentation,' she said, shakily. She nodded to the servers, who replaced their guns in the hidden holsters at their sides. 'The servers will escort everyone back to Star Seasons at once.' She moved over to the Dean. 'As you can see, I've already activated the security alpha setting so that these servers know to protect me and my team.'

The Dean's scowl deepened, but he said nothing.

'Now, with your permission, I'm going to step up security in this complex as well,' she said, loudly enough for everyone to hear. 'To the *highest* setting.'

She took hold of the Dean's arm firmly. He frowned and shook her off. 'The highest setting is very expensive,' he growled. 'Star Seasons won't be covering the cost.'

'I'll pay,' said Neon, grandly. 'Safety for my team and protection of this project is paramount.'

'No time for questions, then?' One, brave journalist from the audience got to his feet, doubtfully eyeing the servers.

'No questions,' hissed Neon. 'How do I know any of you are who you say you are. You could all be spies! I can't trust *anyone* now!' and with a small sob she ran from the room, closely followed by the Dean.

As soon as the door closed behind her, the servers went to work. They opened the door that led to the linking tunnel and began to usher people through. The shell-shocked journalists were murmuring to each other in low voices, picking up their coats and bags, moving along like sheep in the direction they were pointed. Crouched on the floor, Bernice and Ruth looked at each other.

'Back to Star Seasons?' asked Ruth.

'Hell no!' said Bernice.

'After Neon?'

'Got it in two.'

'Which door did she go through? They all look the same,' said Ruth. Bernice bit her lip. Her friend was right. It was either the one just behind the stage, or the one to its left. Or the one to its right. Great.

'Let's go for the one on the left,' she said.

The two women pushed unnoticed through the throng of people, slipping through the door into the corridor behind. A group of stripy insects the size of bats blundered against the windows, making furious scratching sounds with their wings.

Outside it was dark, but Bernice could tell that the night was alive with moving insects. As she scuttled down the passage to the door at the end, she realised she was holding Ruth's hand. She gave it a comforting squeeze, then pressed the door release.

The room was dark and quiet and there was no sign of Neon, or anyone else.

'I guess we picked the wrong door,' said Bernice. 'I think this is one of the storerooms. But we can lie low here until the servers have gone.'

'Yeah, the servers,' said Ruth, 'with the *guns*. Benny, why did they have guns?'

Bernice shrugged. 'They probably have a jolly good reason for being armed to the teeth, but until I find out what it is, I'm considering them officially Not On My Side.'

'Right,' said Ruth, stepping into the gloomy room. Bernice followed and the door slid shut behind them. 'Lights!' she said hopefully. Nothing happened.

'Maybe there's a switch,' said Bernice, groping around on the wall.

From outside the complex came a roar of engines.

'Is that the transporter taking off?' said Bernice. 'That was quick.'

'I guess the journalists were moving fast,' said Ruth. 'What with the threat of being shot and all.'

'True,' said Bernice, moving forward and stumbling.

'So,' said Ruth. 'Do we have a plan?'

'Sort of,' said Bernice, reaching down to the ground to feel what had tripped her. It seemed to be a pile of sacks.

'As in you're making one up now?'

'You've got it.'

Ruth waited.

'We'll wait for Neon to calm down then go and have a chat. But Bil's right I think. There's something a little unstable about her. Ouch.'

'What?'

'Something bit me,' said Bernice.

'It wasn't me,' said Ruth.

'No,' said Bernice, slapping at her leg. 'I'd sincerely hope not. It's some kind of insect... of course. Look out! I tried to swat it, but I think it got away.'

'Oh!'

'What?'

'There's something on my arm!' Ruth slapped her arm hard, and felt a small squish. 'Got it.'

'Well done,' said Bernice. She was starting to feel incredibly sleepy, in a way that made the sacking on the floor seem very tempting. All she wanted to do suddenly was shut her eyes. She lowered herself down onto the sacks and rested her head against the wall.

'Benny, what are you doing?'

'I feel tired.'

'Since the bug bite, you mean?' said Ruth, sharply. Bernice could hear the alarm in her friend's voice.

'I don't no,' said Bernice, rubbing her eyes and trying to sit up. 'Oh god, I'm slurring. Roo? Am I slurrin?'

'A little,' said Ruth. 'Benny, are there bugs here that make people sleep?'

'I don't no. You th'exper. Are tha?'

Ruth gave a small gasp of pain and touched her head. 'Several species on Bubastis have had the ability to bring about swift loss of consciousness,' she recited, quickly. 'The black-and-white spotted Cara beetle is particularly fast, with one bite leading to an almost instant deep sleep. Once bitten, the victim will remain asleep for several hours while the Cara feeds on their blood, although there will be minimal after-effects. Fortunately, the Cara is slow-moving and easy to avoid.' She stopped talking with an obvious effort, cradling her head in her hands.

'An' you squish'd it,' slurred Bernice. 'Good ol' Roo. Haha.'

'The beetle on my arm sort of glowed green,' said Ruth, rubbing at her head. 'I don't think it was black and white.'

'Mm?' Bernice's eyes were already closed and she had slumped back on the sacking. The last words she heard were:

'But the one that's crawling up my leg might be. *Ouch!*'

When Ruth awoke, it was still dark. She had been having strange, vivid dreams that shrank instantly from her memory as soon as her eyes opened. Something about a swamp, and a noise like someone sawing through a block of wood...

She tried to stretch out her cramped legs in front of her.

'Hey!' said Bernice with a sleepy snort. 'Get off.'

Ruth retracted her legs and tried to work out what had happened. She remembered slipping off with Bernice when the servers started ushering everyone away. She remembered the guns. 'What time is it?' she whispered.

'About six in the morning,' came a familiar voice from the depths of the storeroom. 'Shall we see about breakfast?'

Ruth gave an involuntary squeal of relief. 'Jack? Is that you? Where are you?' There was a flicker of blue flames over to her left. 'Yes, yes, it's very impressive that you can breathe fire...'

'Belch fire,' corrected Jack.

'... but finding the lights would be more impressive right now.' Ruth struggled to stand and her eyes got more accustomed to the lack of light. There were at least three sets of shutters covering the windows on the outside, which accounted for the darkness, but it seemed like dawn might be breaking. A steady chirrup of insects was in progress, interrupted by the occasional croak and rasp of something larger. She felt her way towards the place Jack's fire had come from, managing to knock into a shelf with her elbow in the process. There was a clatter, as cans toppled down, knocking her off balance.

'Insect repellent,' she said, holding a can up close to her face and squinting at the picture.

'Seems reasonable,' said Jack. 'Are you going to ask me why I came to find you?'

'Why did you come to find us?' asked Ruth, helpfully.

'Because you didn't come back for ages, and I got bored.'

'Sorry,' said Ruth, automatically.

'That's all right. But do *try* being more considerate next time,' said Jack. 'Are you going to ask me *how* I found you?'

'*How* did you find us?' Ruth parroted.

'Well, my plan was to look in every room in the compound, one by one. I heard these rasping snores coming from in here, and I knew that they could only come from a sleeping Summerfield.'

'Thanks,' said Bernice, from the floor.

'You're welcome,' said Jack. 'I tried to wake you up, but you were both out cold. So, I waited.'

'What a thrilling story,' said Bernice testily, getting to her feet.

'Oh, you want *thrilling*?' said Jack. 'Well, I can't really manage that right now. But I can put on the lights.' With a flourish, he passed his hand over a light sensor and the overhead lights flicked on, flooding the room instantly in a cold, white light. Ruth, who had assumed she was standing next to a large cupboard, suddenly found herself face to face with a giant insect. Its eyes – so many eyes – bulged out of a scaly blue face, which was also home to a mess of razor sharp teeth.

Ruth screamed in pain, screwing her eyes tightly shut.

Bernice was beside her in an instant. 'Ruth, it's fine. It's not real. It's a model, I saw it on the guided tour.'

But Ruth was shaking, holding her hands up to her head.

'Ruth, calm down. What's the matter?'

Jack took off his jacket and threw it over the model to hide it as Bernice guided her friend to the pile of sacks and made her sit down. 'Ruth? *Ruth*? Talk to me.'

Ruth slowly turned to look at Bernice with glassy eyes, pressing her fingers to her temples in pain. 'Too many books,' she muttered. 'They're all unloading, different theories, names, dates... Ugh.' She shook her head from side to side. 'It's like... fireworks going off in my brain.'

Bernice frowned in confusion. 'Jack? Help me out here. What's wrong with Ruth?' she asked. But before he could answer, the door to the storeroom swung open. Jack disappeared behind a pile of dirty, orange overalls at an alarming speed, as Bernice spun round to see the plump outline of Neon Tsara in the doorway. She was wearing a pair of lime and lemon-patterned leggings and a tight black jumper that strained in the obvious places.

'Well hello there,' said Neon, folding her arms under her breasts. 'I recognise you from the press conference, when you dived so elegantly under a chair. What are you doing in my storeroom?'

It is entirely possible that cat-like creatures from another galaxy crash-landed on Bubastis and were used as slaves by a super-race of giant insects, who genetically modified their fingers for work. After hundreds of years, the cats rebelled and the brutal insect overlords decided to eradicate them, first forcing them to build huge multi-fingered statues as a punishment. However, it was not until the last cat was gone that these evil insects realised how dependent they had been on their cat slaves. Soon they too had disappeared without trace.

Hey, It's Just A Theory!

Bungle O'Regan

CHAPTER ELEVEN

NEON'S OFFICE

There were situations, Bernice thought, where you just needed to ignore the tricky questions and cut to the chase. 'Professor Neon Tsara, I presume,' she said. 'Pleased to meet you. I'm *Professor* Bernice Summerfield.'

Neon ignored the outstretched hand. 'One of Gregory's new Friends?' she asked, coldly.

'Gregory?' repeated Bernice in surprise. 'Oh, no, I don't know Gregory. I only met him on the transporter. Briefly.'

'You're not a Friend of Stone?'

'I've never met a rock I liked more than a person,' said Bernice, realising instantly it was untrue.

'Well,' said Neon. 'If you're *not* spying for Gregory, then I take it you are a journalist. And didn't I make it quite clear yesterday that the press were to leave?'

'Yes,' said Bernice. 'But I'm not a journalist either. I'm an archaeologist.' She glanced at Ruth. 'She's my assistant.'

'Really?' asked Neon, with a nod at Ruth. 'She looks ill.'

Ruth was sitting still, pressing at her head. 'I'd appreciate it if you were both a bit quieter,' she said. 'Or, if you have any painkillers, that would be helpful too. I have a headache.'

'I'm calling security,' said Neon, coolly. 'You can't stay.' She took a small device off her belt and held it to her mouth. 'Server?' she said. 'I need back-up in Storeroom Two.'

'Stop!' cried Jack, leaping up from behind a stack of overalls. 'There's no need for servers.'

Neon regarded him in surprise. It was obvious she hadn't noticed him in his hiding place. Jack glided towards Neon and took her hand, gently kissing the tips of her fingers in turn. 'Enchanté,' he said. 'Has anyone ever told you what a beautiful colour your hair is? And your name – Tsara – it sounds very familiar, but I can't quite place it. Have we met?'

'Jack, what are you doing?' Bernice groaned, embarrassed. But whatever he was doing, it seemed to have struck the right note. Neon's startled face began to lose some of its coldness as she pulled her hand away, with a girlish giggle.

'Wait, cancel that,' she said into the speaker, then turned her attention to Jack. 'Hello, stranger. I don't remember seeing *you* at the press conference.'

'He's my, er, assistant,' said Bernice, shooting a glance at Ruth. 'I mean, my *other* assistant. Jack. He's just arrived with some important news.'

'That's right,' said Jack smoothly. 'I'm indispensable. So don't even think about dispensing with me.'

'Do you know, I'm not sure I would,' replied Neon, with a smile, taking hold of Jack's hand. She stroked one long fingernail down the lines in his palm. 'I can tell by your mound of Venus that you mean no harm,' she said, eyeing him coyly. 'Shall we go to my office, where it's a bit more comfortable? Then we can all find out a bit more about each other over some breakfast. I've got croissants!'

Neon's office was tidier than most of the working spaces Bernice had seen on expeditions like this. In fact, she was inclined to deduce that the amount of work going on in this room was negligible.

There was a wallscreen, which seemed to have been set to a constant backdrop of clouds and rainbows, and a comfortable-looking couch, on which Ruth instantly slumped, massaging

her aching head with her fingers. There were a few piles of papers on a desk, but Bernice got the distinct impression they were for show, rather than in the actual process of being consulted.

Jack paced up and down, looking out of the large, semi-circular window. The insect life of Bubastis was on the move now that the day had begun. A large fly the colour of rotten oranges was making its sticky way along the outside of the glass.

On the floor was a collection of photographs arranged in artful piles, each weighted down with rocks and twigs and interspersed with white candles in metal bowls. Bernice knew there would be twenty-three piles without even counting. Stuck to the wall above them were pretty pink note cards with slogans added in curly script. Bernice leaned closer to read them. In the dot of each 'i', Neon had drawn a cat's face with cute pointy ears and whiskers.

'Blessed with pure feelings of feline love.'

'Plugged in to adoring the ancient stones.'

'Loving the inspirational companionship of the longstanding.'

'Um,' said Bernice, looking suspiciously at Neon. 'Did you do this?' she asked.

'It's a combined effort,' said Neon, modestly. 'The team and I usually start the day with a meditation. Any thoughts that we channel I write down and put here, to keep us all in constant communication with the stones.'

'The stones?'

'The Cats, I mean.' Neon flashed a smile at Bernice.

'Look,' said Bernice, sitting down next to Ruth on the couch. 'We need to talk – not about the Cats. I'm friends with Bil.' She waited for a response, but Neon gave a polite shrug. '*Bil Bil*?' said Bernice. 'From Star Seasons Research? He's Mina Gloap's uncle.'

At Mina's name, Neon gave a little shaky breath and held a hand to her mouth. 'My poor little Mimi,' she said. 'She has an uncle?'

'Yes,' said Bernice. 'As far as I'm aware you've already met him. He arranged for Mina to come and work down here.'

'I'm ever so busy, you know,' said Neon. 'I'm just constantly meeting new people at the moment. It's a good thing I get on so well with everyone!'

'Except your exes,' said Jack, archly.

'Oh!' said Neon, simpering in his direction. 'I usually get on *tremendously* well with my exes. Not that I have that many. But Gregory is a bit of an exception you see, he has...' She lowered her lashes and murmured the words, '... a dark side.'

'Cute though,' said Bernice.

'Oh yes, he has a certain charm,' said Neon. 'But there are aspects to his personality that only come out as you get to know him.'

'So. Mina...' prompted Bernice.

'Mina...?' said Neon.

'We were talking about *Mina*,' Bernice said. 'The bottom line is that her uncle is worried. He says she's gone missing.'

'Missing,' said Neon thoughtfully. 'I'm not sure "missing" is the right word. She wanted to do some solo research in the swamps, so I let her. She had a pretty intense meditation session when she got here where she really felt the Cats talking to her. They told her to learn more about the indigenous population of Bubastis, so I gave her their funny little Rule Book to read. You're aware of our Bubastian friends?' she asked.

'Not so much,' said Bernice. 'But my friend – erm, my first assistant, Ruth – is the expert. That's why she came along.'

'Yes,' said Ruth, through gritted teeth. 'If someone gets me a painkiller I'll resume my role as Galactic Nobal Expert right away.'

‘Surely you mean *Bal* expert,’ corrected Neon. ‘The Nopal died out thousands of years ago, leaving the Bal’s ancestors to take on the mantle of pre-eminent species on Bubastis.’

There was an awkward silence.

‘Let me just check something,’ said Jack. He crouched down on the floor next to Ruth. ‘How long do the Bal live?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know,’ snapped Ruth. ‘I have a headache.’

‘Right,’ said Jack. ‘And how long do the Nopal live?’

A flash of pain crossed Ruth’s face. ‘No-one knows the exact physical attributes of the Nopal due to the lack of available data,’ said Ruth. She took a deep breath out. ‘And if you ask me another question about them I will tear out your lungs.’

‘Everything all right?’ asked Neon.

‘Perfectly,’ said Jack. ‘Ruth’s definitely the galactic expert on the Nopal.’

‘Well that’s simply lovely,’ said Neon, with a tinkling laugh. ‘Do you know, I wasn’t aware there was such a thing. As far as I’d heard, there was next to no evidence that they existed at all.’

‘The Nopal...’ said Ruth, jerkily. ‘They... they had...’

‘Yes?’ asked Neon, with an amused smile.

‘Ruth, are you okay?’ asked Bernice.

‘Oh, it’s no good.’ Ruth frowned. ‘It’s horrid. It’s like the information is all in layers inside my head and I can only reach the bottom bits.’

‘Access denied,’ said Jack. ‘Ruth, have you told Benny about your little trip to the Library?’

‘Not yet,’ said Ruth with a grimace.

‘Ruth used the Library to become an expert on a different civilisation from the one you wanted to know about,’ said Jack, in a sing-song voice.

‘Well, isn’t that funny?’ said Neon. She gave a bashful glance at Jack. ‘But I’m sure it will be *terribly* useful. In fact, I’m beginning to think that you three are my guardian angels. Please tell me you’ll stay for a bit. It looks like you can all be a tremendous amount of help.’

‘Really?’ Bernice was taken aback. ‘You don’t think we’re spies?’

‘Did I say that? I did, didn’t I. I am so sorry about that. Gregory interrupting the conference was such a shock, so *shaming*. But now he’s gone, and who do I have instead? One super-duper archaeologist, her handsome assistant, and a leading expert on the Nopal. I’ll have to thank Bil for sending you.’

‘No,’ said Bernice. She was beginning to understand what Bil had meant about how hard it was to talk to this woman. ‘Bil didn’t send us to help *you*...’

‘Although you’re spot on with the handsome assistant bit,’ said Jack with a grin. He leaned against the desk, nonchalantly batting a buzzing fly out of the way.

Bernice shot him an evil look. ‘We’re here to find Mina,’ she said sternly.

Neon’s face took on a serious expression. ‘Can I talk to you in private for a second?’ she asked. Bernice nodded, relieved, and let herself be led out of the room.

In the corridor, just out of earshot of Ruth and Jack, Neon clutched at Bernice’s arm tightly and put her mouth close to her ear. ‘Oh my god, he’s *beautiful*,’ she breathed. She smelled of synthetic glittery perfume and rose mouthwash.

Bernice pulled away.

‘Isn’t he?’ pressed Neon. ‘I’m sorry if he’s yours, but I’m not getting that vibe, so seriously – can I speak seriously? – I think I’m going to need your help here.’

‘What do you mean, “mine”?’ asked Bernice. ‘Jack’s not mine. Why does everyone assume he’s mine? Ruth’s not mine either. I just have a lot of assistants.’

‘Oh darling, so do I,’ said Neon. ‘You have to when you’re at the top of your game.’

'Yes,' said Bernice, through gritted teeth. 'But this is all irrelevant, because the bottom line is: Bil is really worried about Mina. Do you know where she is?'

'Well yes, she's here, on Bubastis.' Neon grinned and gave Bernice's arm a little squeeze, pulling her closer again. 'Okay? Now, can we have dinner together later? You, me and... Jack.'

'Stop it,' said Bernice. 'If she's here, can I see her?'

'I told you, she went to do some solo work in the swamps a few days ago, so I haven't seen her for a while. Don't worry, I'd know if something had gone wrong. We have a soul link.'

Bernice boggled. 'I'm sorry. A what?'

'Soul link.' Neon shook her head enthusiastically, and her pink curls swing wildly around. 'I have one with all my team. It means that if anything bad happened to Mimi, I would *feel* it.'

'Does that mean,' asked Bernice, as politely as she could manage, 'that you're not going to search for her.'

'I have a wonderful idea,' said Neon, a sudden gleam coming into her eyes. 'Why don't *you and Ruth* go out and have a little look for her? Take your time! You can get some sandwiches from the canteen. Have a picnic!'

'And Jack?' said Bernice.

'Oh, I don't think it needs three of you,' said Neon. 'He can stay here with me for a while.'

Bernice was trying to work out if this was going to be the best offer she would get, when the door at the far end of the corridor banged open and a girl in a tight-fitting Team Neon shirt came crashing in from the canteen. She was small and blonde with a long fringe and a slightly vacant expression. She stopped when she saw them, obviously not expecting anyone to be in the corridor, and quickly rearranged her features into a melodramatic look of shock.

'Neon, you've got to come quickly,' she gasped.

'Slow down,' said Neon. 'Come where, Allie? What's happened?'

'It's the *Dean*,' said the girl, with an affected sob. 'He went out to look at the Cats, but there's been a terrible *accident*. The Bal killed him.'

*So who will go with me
Across the boggy borders?
With a Hey! And a Ho!
And a Tyrellee-i-o!
"Not I," said Young Blue Tip
Bristling by the Meeting House
"Nor I," said Father Red Patch
For 'tis not our year to go!*

Folk Songs of the Bal
Transl. Old Farrington

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE CATS

Neon's bottom lip quivered and she rushed towards Allie, pulling her into a tight hug.

'Oh my dear, sweet girl,' she said. 'Did you see it? Was it dreadful?'

'I don't know,' said Allie, sniffing. 'I wasn't there, okay? Rufus told me to tell you. He's in the canteen.'

The door to Neon's office slowly opened, and Jack sidled out. He had obviously been listening to everything Neon had been saying before. Bernice looked past him and caught sight of Ruth lying on Neon's couch. Jack mouthed the word 'sleeping' and then 'awwww'. Bernice was relieved. Ruth's strange turn in the storeroom had alarmed her. A proper, non-bug-induced sleep would probably do her good. She turned her attention back to Neon.

'Is there anything we can do to help?' she asked awkwardly.

'Oh please, just tell me you'll stay, now that I am in true need of a *friend*.' Neon's eyes lingered on Jack. 'Allie, look after our guests,' she said, then moved off down the corridor to the canteen, sending a cloud of tiny flies that had gathered on the back of her neck rushing into the air.

Bernice looked at Jack and raised her eyebrows. Was he thinking what she was thinking? Jack shrugged unhelpfully.

'Allie,' Bernice said gently. 'I'm sure the news of the Dean's death has been upsetting for you.' Allie nodded her head. 'It's fine if you don't feel up to talking about it right now, but I just need to check one thing. You did say it was an accident, didn't you? Because, if the Bal are dangerous, it sheds a different light on the disappearance of our friend's niece.'

'Why would the bugs want to kill anyone on purpose?' asked Allie.

'I don't know,' said Bernice. 'Maybe they were angry that the Dean was visiting the Cats.'

'Oh, they don't care about the Cats,' said Allie. She reached into her pocket and found a packet of sweets. She popped one in her mouth, then offered one to Bernice. With her message delivered, and Neon gone, she no longer seemed to feel it necessary to be upset by the turn of events. 'Neon says you think they'd be slightly interested in what we're doing, seeing as it's their own history, but they're not.' She rolled the sweet from one side of her mouth to the other. 'Rufus didn't say much about what happened. I think he might have been in shock. He kept mentioning the Ambassador.'

'The one who welcomed us to Bubastis?' said Bernice.

'Yeah, it was gross, right?' said Allie, her tone turning gossipy. 'Like, eating its own skin? It had only just had its changeover.'

'Its what?' Jack asked.

'The Bal shed their skin every year, on their birthday,' said Allie. 'I know, disgusting. And it's called the changeover, because that's when they change jobs.'

'Go on,' said Jack.

'Uh, the Bal have a different job for every year of their lives?' said Allie. 'That's what I heard, anyway.'

'In a set sequence?' asked Bernice, curiously.

Allie nodded and popped another sweet into her mouth. 'I think so. Like, when they're twelve or something, they all have to be teachers, then when they're thirteen, they all have to be builders. They even have a year of reproduction... I bet they all look forward to that one.' She sniggered. 'However it works. Did you know they're all hermaphrodites?'

Bernice frowned, waving away the last snide bit of information. So the Ambassador had only been in office for a couple of days at the most. That was interesting. No wonder it had looked so uncomfortable making its speech.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a movement from Jack. He had been staring out of the corridor window, attempting to make small talk to a green moth on the other side of the thick glass, when suddenly, with a horrified gasp, he ducked down out of sight under the window, sliding down the wall to the floor and landing in a more dignified cross-legged position.

'Jack?' asked Bernice.

'Sit down, Benny,' Jack said. 'We need to talk! No time like the present.' He patted the floor beside him alluringly. 'You too, Team Neon.'

'Er... okay,' said Allie, gingerly crouching down.

'Do you know Mina Gloap?'

'Huh?' Allie seemed surprised. 'What, *druggy* Mina?'

Jack and Bernice exchanged glances. This was new.

'I guess so,' said Jack.

'She's missing,' said Bernice. 'And we're looking for her. Do you have any idea where she might have gone?'

'Well,' said Allie, screwing up her face as she thought. 'She was saying the other day that she wanted to see what the Cats and the Bal village were like at night, because they'd be totally *trippy*.'

'Have you seen her since then?' asked Bernice.

'Uh,' said Allie. 'I don't know. Why?'

'Oh my god,' said Bernice. 'What is *wrong* with you people? I've owed my life several times over to a good search party. Mina's been missing for *days*, and you think it's fine?'

'Oh lighten up, Summerfield,' said Jack, briskly. 'I've got a plan. There are two places to look, so let's split up and search for Mina right now. Ruth can get some sleep. We don't need to bother Neon any more, she'll have her hands full dealing with this Dean business.'

Allie gave a little fake sounding sob at the mention of the dead man.

'Did you know him?' asked Jack, impatiently.

Allie shook her head.

'Then stop making a fuss. I'll go to the Bal settlement, and Benny, you can go to the Cats. We've got the portable comms from the shuttle so we can stay in touch. Allie, do you have any transport we can borrow?'

'No,' said Allie. 'You can't use a wheeled vehicle in the marshes. Or a non-wheeled one. We did have two hovercraft vans at the start.'

'Where are they now?' asked Bernice.

'I don't know,' said Allie with a shrug. 'Bugs kept getting sucked up into their air tubes and blocking them. You couldn't travel more than a few hundred yards without having to stop and clean them out.'

'I see,' said Bernice. 'Got any boots?'

'Yes,' said Allie. 'There are waders in Storeroom Three with the vis suits.'

'Then that will have to do,' said Jack, moving into a crouching position and peering cautiously over the edge of the windowsill. His eyes darted left and right several times before he stood up. Bernice eyed him curiously, following his gaze out into the swamp. She could see nothing but trees and insects.

Jack brushed down his suit, held out a hand to hoist Allie to her feet, and gave her a little push in the direction of the canteen. 'You first,' he said, and they moved off down the corridor. 'Soooo, you like the plan, B?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Bernice. 'I've got to admit it's good. Splitting up gives us double the chance of finding out what's happened to Mina. Plus this way, I get to have a look at the Cats up close, which to be honest I've been dying to ever since we got here. It's perfect. It's...' she stopped suddenly, glaring at Jack. 'It's *too* perfect. What's the catch?'

Jack gave a beguiling grin and held one hand over his heart. 'As if there would be a catch! I'm your go-to guy for a good solid plan, that's all. When have I ever let you down?'

'No comment,' said Bernice. 'Jack, maybe we should find Neon first. Tell her where we're going, and see what happened to the Dean.'

'No, no and no,' said Jack, calmly. 'I had a plan and you said it was a good plan, so let's stick with it.'

'There's a dead man out there,' protested Bernice.

'There's an unfortunate situation out there, but it is under control,' said Jack. 'Neon's in charge of this outfit, Benny. It's NYD.'

'NY what?'

'Not Your Dig.'

Bernice sighed. She took in Allie's bovine expression as she chewed on another sweet, then Jack's studied look of unconcern. Perhaps she was overreacting. 'Okay,' she said. 'We'll stick with the plan. Allie, is there anything we need to know about the terrain out there?'

'Not that I can think of,' said Allie, wrinkling her nose. 'It's a pretty direct route to the Cats, and you can see them all the way. The ground's a bit squelchy.'

'Well, that's marshland for you,' said Bernice.

'Suppose so. It's not all marshy stuff all the way, it sort of stops when you get close to the Cats. They were built on solid ground. Otherwise they'd have sunk years ago, right?'

'Right,' said Bernice.

'Yeah,' said Allie, vaguely. 'But if you see a swarm of flies with yellowy bodies, stay away because there's sinking sand.'

'Do you know, as professional archaeological outfits go, you guys aren't the most *professional* I've ever encountered?'

Allie shrugged. 'Great T-shirts though, right?'

Resplendent in a vivid orange Team Neon weatherproof vis suit and waders, Bernice set out through the misty trees towards the Cats. The suit had a hood with a thin gauze that covered her face like an old-fashioned bee-keeper's outfit, and she was very glad of its protection. As it was, her body was already polka-dotted with the splats of incautious insects' bodies, and the thought of any flying into her eyes, mouth or hair was extremely unpleasant. The noise of clicking, hooting and buzzing was still deafeningly loud even with the suit on, and Bernice could understand why the glass in the compound was so thick. Every now and then a wave of sound came at her from one direction or another, as a massed swarm of insects chirruped their news to another swarm on a nearby tree. A few times the noise was so close that she stumbled, losing her balance as her inner ears reverberated.

As she kept a cautious eye out for flies 'with yellowy bodies', Bernice couldn't help marvelling at the sheer volume and variety of insect life she saw. Star Seasons were silly to hire Bil to study languages when they could have had a *bona fide* entomologist on board, she thought, and felt a little guilty for wishing her friend out of a job.

Then she remembered the book of poetry she had agreed to write for him, and felt even guiltier at the nagging feeling that she wasn't exactly up to the challenge.

Perhaps the Cats would provide inspiration, she thought. Think positive! Why not? She already had an excited knot in her stomach at the thought that she would soon be close enough to touch the ancient statues...

Bernice wrenched her thoughts back to the present. 'Stay focused, Benny,' she scolded herself quietly. 'It's fine to be excited about the Cats, but Mina is still the priority. You can take a quick look at the Cats and... oh my god, they're *huge*.'

The Cats were massive. Towering above the trees and staring with their huge, stone eyes into the distance, they were a sight that would impress the most jaded of travellers. Even the noise of the insects seemed quieter in their presence and, Bernice noted, not one bug, dead or alive, marred the cool stone of the five giants.

There was no-one about. Bernice moved forward and rested her palm against the nearest Cat, then started to walk slowly around it. It was about forty feet in diameter, the stone rough beneath her glove.

The Cats' creators had made no attempt to show fur, or if they had, it was now gone. Bernice wondered idly if the statues had originally been painted. It wouldn't be hard to find out. In her old life, she'd known people who specialised in revealing the original colours and decorations of ancient artifacts, but she somehow doubted that this was an area that Neon was investigating. She just wished it didn't annoy her so much.

She peered up at the stone bug that crawled from – or into – the Cat's mouth. There was something familiar about it, but she couldn't quite work out what it was.

She completed a circuit then moved back, taking in the other Cats. She had to admit that close up, they were less picturesque and more, well, *threatening* than she had been expecting. What would she see in their faces she wondered, as she looked into the eyes of the nearest Cat. What would reflect the state of her soul right now? Then she dropped her gaze with a shudder. Oh god, she hoped Neon hadn't been right, because what she saw was chilling: Insanity. Cool, clear madness.

Bernice thought of calling Mina's name, then decided against it. First, she would check out the rest of the site. Team Neon had built a wooden platform on stilts that raised it a few feet above the ground, presumably to keep some of the insects at bay. On it was a hut, several crates with their lids firmly attached and the bright orange hat from a vis suit. A fleshy beetle had set up home in the netting at the front.

A thought struck her. Had this hat belonged to the Dean? An image swam unbidden into Bernice's mind, of the old man lying face down on the platform, beetles crawling in his white beard. Ugh. She brushed it away, angry at her imagination. His death had been an accident, she told herself firmly. Neon was investigating it and it was all under control. NYD. Even so... Bernice bent down and picked up a thick stick from the mud. It felt comfortingly heavy in her gloved hand.

She walked down the line of Cats, looking at each face in turn. The thin eyes, small nose and mouth seemed to resemble the features of a typical Terran cat, but the sculpting was so crude and rough it was hard to make much out. It wasn't just wear and tear either, Bernice thought. It seemed as if they had been made that way, as if the sculpting had been done in a hurry. But that was ridiculous. No-one would build something like this without planning and preparation. Statues of this size were surely meant to stand the test of time, why would you rush? Maybe the Ancient Bal had a different standard of art.

She perused the celebrated double rows of stone fingers that stretched out in front of each Cat. Long and elegant, they rested on the ground, each finger ending in a curved stone fingernail, filed to a point and strangely beautiful. Quickly, Bernice counted the fingers of the nearest Cat.

Twenty-two, no doubt about it.

Then the next. Twenty-two again.

Cats with fingers on a planet of insects. Why? The old 'spaceman mistaken for deity by natives' theory clamoured for attention in Bernice's mind, but she couldn't quite make it fit. If

someone *had* crash-landed on Bubastis – perhaps with a pet cat – then would the insects really have chosen to worship them as this odd hybrid?

‘Is conundrum,’ said a voice behind her.

‘You what?’ Bernice whirled round, brandishing her stick in front of her then, realising the stature of her potential adversary, brandishing it about three feet lower. It looked like the Bal she had met earlier at the compound. Its shell still seemed patchy and sore. ‘Oh, I’m so sorry, er, Ambassador?’

‘Grey Line,’ confirmed the bug, raising one of its legs and indicating a faint grey line that circled the lower part of its abdomen. ‘Would point out *Bal* not holding stick,’ it added pointedly. ‘Please drop.’ Bernice did so, feeling embarrassed. ‘Thank you. I *said*: Is conundrum.’

‘Oh,’ said Bernice. ‘It is. I’m sure it is, yes. What is?’

‘Forefathers build monstrosities.’

‘The Cats?’ said Bernice. ‘I think they have a certain charm.’ The Ambassador rubbed its top two legs together in annoyance. ‘Or a sense of mystery at least,’ continued Bernice quickly. ‘I mean, it’s exciting that Neon thinks she can find out why they were built.’

‘Is no matter to Bal,’ said the Ambassador. ‘Things from past hide no clue to present.’

‘Oh, but surely they must, a little,’ said Bernice. ‘With respect, all history...’

‘No,’ said the Ambassador. ‘Bal not venerate ancestors. Live, work, die in present. No past. No future.’

‘Ah,’ said Bernice. She was trying hard to work out if, among the hisses and clicks of its speech, she could detect a sense of disappointment. ‘Yes, I heard that was the case.’

‘Bal think what Bal think,’ said the Ambassador. ‘And Grey Line is Bal.’ He paused. ‘But year before this, Grey Line write poem about Cats.’

‘Sounds good,’ said Bernice, trying not to think of Bil sitting at his desk waiting for her own poetical efforts.

‘Year before now, year of writing,’ said the Ambassador. ‘Bal write stories for hatchlings. Bal write news reports. Bal write political works. Grey Line write poem about Cats.’

‘And was it well received?’ asked Bernice.

‘No,’ said the Ambassador. ‘Is reason Grey Line made Ambassador during year of Public Service.’

Bernice’s eyes opened a little wider as she understood. ‘The position of Ambassador is a punishment?’ she asked.

‘No Bal want job with mammals,’ shrugged the Ambassador. ‘Make Bal itch.’

‘Well,’ said Bernice. ‘I’m sure Neon and her team are pleased to have met you.’

The Ambassador made the impatient clicking sound again.

‘Well, *I*’m pleased to have met you anyway,’ said Bernice. ‘I’d been wondering what the Bal think about the Cats.’

‘You here to ask Grey Line about Cats?’ hissed the Ambassador. It sounded incredulous.

‘No,’ said Bernice with a sigh. ‘Not at all. I’m here to look for Mina. It’s just...’ she gestured hopelessly at the line of unsmiling statues. ‘I’d *love* to work on a dig like this and I’ve got a horrible suspicion that Neon and her team aren’t doing it right. And you know what? That makes *me* itch. But I shouldn’t let myself get distracted. God knows, no-one else is looking for the poor girl.’ She had a thought. ‘Will you come with me?’

‘Grey Line must wait here,’ said the Ambassador.

‘Oh,’ said Bernice. ‘Okay. Why?’

‘Grey Line wait with body,’ said the Ambassador. It waved a leg in the direction of the trees and Bernice could suddenly make out a lumpy shape on the ground, wrapped in a kind of tarpaulin. Oh, god.

'Body wrapped up tight over there,' said the Ambassador. 'Now, Grey Line wait investigation.'

'You're investigating the Dean's death,' said Bernice with an embarrassed groan. 'Of course you are. What makes me think I'm the only one with problems? Do you know how the Dean died?'

'Grey Line tell what Bal think on Cats first.'

'Really?' said Bernice. 'Well, all right. That would be lov-'

'Ugly, pointless, irrelevant,' said the Ambassador. It clicked its legs together in a possible laugh. 'Leave alone.'

Then it broke off suddenly, and pointed into the trees with his middle pair of legs. 'Here come,' it whispered. The little barbs that ran along the outside of its legs quivered upwards as they stood to attention.

Three figures were advancing steadily through the trees. Each was kitted out in waders and orange suits, making it hard to tell who they were, until Bernice noticed the strange rigidity of each body – and that they all held handguns. The servers again? She'd assumed they would go back to Star Seasons with the journalists, but Neon had obviously kept some behind. Why had she sent them here? Had she changed her mind about the search for Mina? The servers fanned out into a line, then edged sideways through the mushy leaves until Bernice and the Ambassador were surrounded.

'Hello there,' said Bernice. 'Lovely to see you again, but I'm afraid I'm not much of a fan of this gun-out-all-the-time thing you've got going on. It makes me a bit jittery. Look! I'm not even holding a stick...' She held out her hands, palm up to show that she wasn't armed. The servers said nothing but each one took a step in, tightening the circle. She cursed under her breath. 'Neon knows I'm here,' she added. 'I'm looking for a missing girl. One of her team.' The servers took one more step forward, encircling Bernice and the Ambassador. Bernice took a step backwards, slipping outside of the circle. The servers ignored her.

'Ambassador Grey Line,' said a server. 'Come with us.'

'Yes, of course. Grey Line did wait...' began the Ambassador, but the words turned into a scream as a server grabbed hold of the insect's sensitive antennae, twisted them round and fired a single shot into its lower abdomen. Bernice watched in horror as the Ambassador sunk to the ground.

'Oh my god,' shouted Bernice. 'What did you do that for? You've killed it!'

'No we haven't. There are no vital organs in that section of the Bal body,' said the nearest server. 'It'll be fine.'

'It doesn't look fine,' said Bernice, trying to push her way through the servers. 'Why did you do that? It's the Ambassador!' The insect was making a strange keening noise, its legs waving feebly in the air. 'Oh god, just look at it, for goodness' sake. It's in pain.'

'The Ambassador,' said the server, looking pointedly at Bernice with a silvery frown, 'has just murdered the Dean of Star Seasons.'

Two servers produced a large net and started to bundle the Ambassador's twitching body into it. They hoisted it into the air, ignoring the clicks of pained protest.

'It can't have,' said Bernice in horror. 'It seemed so nice...'

'You are obviously an excellent judge of character,' said the third server, pointing its gun at Bernice's head. Bernice slowly raised her hands in the air as she heard the all-too-familiar words. 'I think you should come with us.'

I hand't really planned on going to Babastis; because the Lonely Universe Book said that it was inhospitable and the locals had no appatude for tourism. But there was all that stuff in teh papers, wasn't there? Then the ship I was on had to stop for emergency repairs, so I got out and had a look round anyway. I give it 2 stars out of ten.

Gapyearbloggerz.com

Tulip Fawcett

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GIRLS' DORM

Ruth awoke to find the compound almost deserted. She wandered the corridors looking for life and found Allie alone in the canteen, eating a large slice of chocolate cake. The surrounding tables were littered with plates of half-eaten food and empty mugs, and several balls were still scattered around the pool table as though the people playing had been forced to leave mid-game.

Neon had insisted that everyone went deep into the swamps to do some kind of prayer ceremony for the Dean, Allie explained. She had stayed behind because she felt a bit sick. Yes, the chocolate cake was helping. Had the weird-looking guy with the pointy ears and the older lady gone too? No, they'd gone to look for Mina. No, it was fine, the Bal weren't on a killing spree, they weren't in any danger.

Ruth's head was still throbbing painfully and, although she would have gone out to rescue her friends from hordes of murderous insects without a second thought, she was quite relieved that she didn't have to at this very moment. She sat at one of the windows in the canteen, watching a small rain of dead beetles fall outside. The tiny glistening bodies were making little heaps on the boggy ground.

'No idea why they do it,' Allie said, when Ruth asked. 'Just a beetle thing.' She seemed to have about as much interest in the fauna of Bubastis as she did in the Dean's death: Neither were as important as her cake.

It was obvious that the girl had no real desire to talk, but Ruth couldn't help trying to start a conversation. Her brain was still tingling with inaccessible information; it was an itch she couldn't scratch, and talking helped her to ignore it.

'So, are there really no mammals on Bubastis?' she asked.

'Not one,' said Allie, through a mouthful of chocolate icing. 'Bugs, bugs, bugs. That's why the Cats are so weird, yeah?'

'Yes,' said Ruth. 'Is that why you're interested in them?'

'Well, I suppose so, right? Because it's like a mystery. And we're going to be the ones to unravel it.'

'Oh, you are?' Ruth couldn't help grinning at the girl's certainty.

'Yeah, Neon says so. She's pretty much solved the mystery already, but she's keeping it a secret until we find the evidence to back it up.'

Ruth decided not to question, for now, the dubious nature of fitting the evidence to the theory rather than vice versa. 'How did you meet Neon?' she asked.

'At college on Altan,' said Allie, through a forkful of cake.

'You went to *college* with Neon?' asked Ruth, puzzled. Allie couldn't be more than nineteen.

'Uh, *no*,' laughed Allie, peering out from under her long fringe. 'God! She *came* to the college, you know?'

'You mean she was recruiting?' Ruth wished Bernice were here to tell her whether or not this was a standard way of putting together an archaeological team. 'How many people on – er – Team Neon are students?'

Allie shrugged. 'Well, we all are,' she said. 'About eight signed up from my college, and there are, like, five students from Coast Central-Barside Tech. The rest are from the academies.'

'And you're all studying archaeology?' asked Ruth.

'Oh god, no,' said Allie. 'I don't think any of us are, but I can't really remember. I'm doing Ancient Social Media like Joe. He's so funny! The other day he said something about my shoes, and I couldn't stop laughing for like a whole hour, you know? We call him "The Walrus" because –'

'You like Joe then, I take it?' said Ruth, cutting her off.

'Oh no, not like that,' said Allie, making an unconvincing 'ugh' face. 'I've been going out with Haven since last Friday. *He's* studying combined theology and press relations.' She screwed up her face and tapped her fork on the side of her plate as she tried to think. 'I'm sure a lot of people told me what they're doing, but I guess I forgot.'

'So, Neon has a pet theory about the Cats,' said Ruth slowly, as she tried to cut through the babble and piece all the information together. 'And she's brought along a bunch of students with hardly any archaeological skills between them so they can watch her prove it.'

'Well, if you put it like that it sounds *bad*,' said Allie. She seemed puzzled, as if she couldn't work out if she was being insulted or not, then she shrugged and went back to her cake. 'But, you know, it's not like that. Neon – she's amazing. She did lots of research with this other team, the Friends of the Stones, or something? But then she found out that they were planning to steal her ideas and take all the credit.' Her eyes opened wide as she told the story. 'She was *really* upset, because they'd been really close.'

'You mean, ex-husband kind of close?' said Ruth.

'Yeah, that guy at the press thing. He was out of control, right? Anyway, sucks to be him, because Neon took *all* the notes and equipment and found a new team.'

'Stealing his ideas and taking all the credit...' said Ruth.

'No,' said Allie, flipping her long hair out of her eyes. Ruth fought back a compulsion to help her clip it neatly back. 'No, it wasn't like that. They did it first, they were stabbing her in the back and stuff.'

'I see,' said Ruth, soothingly. 'So what happened next? Have you all cut class to come to Bubastis?'

'Noooo,' said Allie, rolling her eyes. 'It's, like, the start of the Year Two break. All the colleges on Altan stop for seven months so you can do work experience or research tasking. Then, you know, you write it up when you get back.'

'Neon turned up at the start of the break. That was good timing. Did she interview?'

'Well, sort of,' said Allie with a sheepish laugh. 'But I guess it was more like, the students who hadn't organised anything else for their break who turned up. I was thinking of going back to my dad's farm and doing something there, but then Neon, you know...'

'Made you a very good offer,' said Ruth. 'Is she *paying* you?'

'Oh yeah,' said Allie, becoming more animated. 'Heaps. She's really rich. It's a great deal. Plus, there's not that much actual work to do, is there? She knows the secrets of the Cats already, so any day now she'll get her evidence and, bam! We'll be famous. I can spend the rest of the break partying with the money I've earned, *and* get the best-ever result for my write-up. God, I probably won't even need to *do* my third year. Whoah!' As she spoke, her fork dived into the last bite of cake a little too enthusiastically and a huge glob of chocolate and cream flipped onto Ruth's dress. Ruth leaped to her feet and started to dab at it with her fingers. The cream slid down, leaving a greasy stain.

'Sorry,' said Allie. 'Gosh, I've really ruined it, haven't I? I can get you a T-shirt from the dorm, if you like? There's loads of Team Neon ones left.' She looked at Ruth's chest. 'All sizes too,' she said helpfully.

'Thanks,' said Ruth. 'You know, from what Benny's told me about archaeological expeditions, I thought it was all leaky tents, rationed food and inhospitable wastelands. She never once mentioned team T-shirts and chocolate cake.'

'You think Bubastis is hospitable?' said Allie. 'With all those bugs outside? Can't you *hear* the chirping?' She laughed. 'Neon can afford to do things properly, that's all. That's why we've got the best compound and the best cake.'

'I guess Star Seasons is generous with the funding,' said Ruth.

'Not a chance,' said Allie. 'Everyone on Altan knows Star Seasons is going down the pan, right? There's a rumour that since the Dean took over, he's been spending all the money on some kind of secret project... Oooh.' She stopped talking and shook her head in surprise. 'It's weird to talk about dead people isn't it? I mean, when they've only just died. It feels wrong.'

'Yes,' said Ruth. 'I'm sorry. Did you know the Dean well?'

'Nah, not at all,' said Allie. 'Anyway, the point is, Neon's funding this whole thing herself.' She sighed, and looked sadly at her newly-empty plate. 'All done here, then,' she said. 'Let's get a new T-shirt.'

Ruth followed Allie down the prefab corridor to the girl's dorm.

'Did Mina sleep here?' she asked. The thought of a little bit of detective work appealed to her. If she found Mina's things, she could scout around for clues, like a diary or... a suicide note. Ruth checked herself guiltily. You can't wish for someone's suicide just so you can try out your sleuthing skills, she admonished herself.

Her headache had died down to a background murmur, although she still felt more than a little queasy when she thought of all the information she had sucked into her brain. She was hoping that it was all quietly being assimilated somehow, while she got on with other things, and that once it was all processed the pain would stop.

Allie paused by the door, one hand on the handle.

'Is this the dorm?' asked Ruth, impatiently.

'Yeah.' Allie made no move to enter, but started smoothing her hair, then fluffing it up and tucking bits behind her ears.

'Oh let me see,' said Ruth, pushing past the gormless girl into the circular dormitory. There were five bunkbeds curving seamlessly around the walls. A young man was lying on one reading a book, wearing nothing but a pair of underpants.

'I'm sorry,' gasped Ruth, taken completely aback. 'I'm so sorry, I wasn't expecting anyone to be... er...' She whirled round to her companion. 'Allie?' she hissed. '*Girls'* dormitory?'

'This *is* the girls' dormitory,' said Allie. 'Hi, Haven! Why aren't you at the prayer thing?'

'Not bothered,' smirked the guy in pants. 'Too busy sleeping.'

'That is *not* a girl,' said Ruth, trying to avert her eyes.

'Yeah, but you know, the girl's dorm gets more light, so Haven likes to – uh – read in my bunk.'

'I'm sure he does,' said Ruth, keeping her tone brisk. 'So, which one is Mina's bed?'

'Bottom bunk on the left by the door,' said Allie. '*Theoretically*. But she doesn't really sleep in here much.'

'Couldn't deal with Allie talking in her sleep,' called Haven from the bunk.

'You shut up!' said Allie, with a giggle.

'*You* shut up!' said Haven, making a big-eyed baby face at her.

'Ahem,' said Ruth. 'You *both* shut up. You are making me feel really old. What did she do, if she didn't sleep?'

Haven and Allie exploded into fits of giggles. Ruth suppressed an urge to fold her arms and tap her foot.

'Oh, sorry, sorry,' said Allie. 'She liked going for night walks, right?' She rummaged around under one of the beds and pulled out a vivid pink T-shirt and black shorts. 'Here you are,' she said, throwing them at Ruth's head. 'Go Team Neon!'

'Are you a new team member?' asked Haven. 'Awesome. We need fresh meat.'

'Ignore him,' said Allie, rolling her eyes. She practically ran over to the bed and sat down next to him with a little bounce. 'He's so *silly*.'

'I'm not joining the team, I'm looking for Mina,' said Ruth, keeping her eyes fixed on the wall.

'Ooh, I haven't seen *her* for a while,' said Haven.

'That's because she's missing,' said Ruth in exasperation. The sheets on Mina's bed were pulled neatly across and the pillow was uncreased. She bent down and looked under the bed. There was a small rucksack, a pot of face cream and two huge earwigs, which scuttled away. She pulled out the bag with a shudder.

'Mina's?' she asked.

'Probably,' said Allie. She was now lying down on the bunk with Haven, her chin resting on his chest. 'You know, now I'm here, I think Haven and I are going to take a little nap.'

Ruth looked at her in horror. 'A nap?' she said. 'Right. I'll leave you two alone then. To *nap*.' She took the rucksack and left the room, as a phrase she'd heard Bernice use suddenly came to her.

'Bloody students,' she muttered.

Ruth went back to the canteen and found a place to sit. There was still no sign of Neon or any of her team. She found a plate of untouched bread rolls and decided to help herself. The rain of insects had stopped, and a group of brown flies was busily forming intricate patterns on the reinforced glass.

Ruth put on the shorts, then pulled off her greasy, cake-stained dress and yanked the pink T-shirt down over her head. It was extremely tight, but that was obviously the style. She sighed, and emptied the contents of Mina's rucksack onto the table. A half eaten apple, two orange pens bearing the Star Seasons logo, a pair of socks (clean), a small electronic something (camera?), an empty packet of sweets and a blue book. The pages had a plasticky feel to them, and were obviously waterproof. Useful on a damp planet like this, Ruth thought. Oh, please let it be a diary.

It wasn't a diary. She turned the first page and read the title. 'Bubastis Rule Book, Galactic Standard Translation 3.1.' The letters were very small and dense and arranged across the pages in several thin columns.

Section 1. Part 1. Insects that fly.

i. The Aarnal Fly (inedible) is a sweet green colour with ridges on its eight wings. It prefers to fly when the weather is stormy and makes the noise 'it-chir-chir-chir' when in flight. It is not to be eaten.

ii. The succulent Nica beetle (inedible) is pink with long, feathery antennae, and should never be eaten. It is to be found under trees, rolling patches of dirt into tiny balls, which it uses to line its nest.

iii. Not to be eaten, the Carotid locust (inedible) is small, tender and pustulous and said to create a frantic state in other locusts with its poisonous tail.

Someone had circled the Carotid locust entry in orange pen and drawn a squiggly question mark next to it. Ruth kept flicking through, until her eyes became tired with the tiny writing. It just went on and on, listing bugs that flew, walked, hopped, liked grapes, ate their own young,

were scared of lightning... Whatever type of bug you were looking for, you would find it here, an exhaustive list of every type of insect that lived on Bubastis.

But why call it a Rule Book? Ruth pondered. Then, flicking through the book, her eye caught sight of an apparently blank page, about halfway in, the first one she'd seen. Intrigued, she stopped and turned the pages back to find it.

Section 47. Part 1. Insects that can be eaten.

There was nothing else on the page, except for a small mark at the bottom. Peering closely, Ruth read:

There are none of these.

I had got that impression already, thought Ruth. I guess it's the golden rule. Or rather, it's the only rule. If so, this is one long book to get across one short point.

'What were you looking for, Mina?' muttered Ruth, because it was obvious that Bil's niece had been studying the book intently. There were several more pages marked with orange pen. Some of the bugs' names had been circled then crossed out, others had stars, question marks or smiley faces beside them.

She was concentrating so hard that she hadn't noticed someone else was in the room with her until she heard a harsh metallic cough over her shoulder. She spun round and saw a server, its face configured as human – two eyes, one nose, all very comforting – holding a gun. And there were two more gun-carrying servers behind it.

'Excuse me, team member, I can see you are hard at work,' said the server, taking in Ruth's hot-pink top. Its tone was sarcastic. 'We have received an important command from Star Seasons with a clearance protocol that enables us to prioritise it alongside the security alpha setting that extends to you and your fellow team members.'

'I'm sorry?' Ruth felt lost.

'We are looking for a criminal who has stolen a small item from Star Seasons.'

'Small?' echoed Ruth, unsure what to say.

'Size isn't everything, you know,' said the server. 'This item cost more money than you could dream of earning in your entire life.'

'That's a bold assumption,' said Ruth, deciding to attempt a smile. 'I could be worth billions.'

'I would hazard a guess that you are not,' said the server.

Ruth glanced at the gun and bit her tongue.

'We have reason to believe the item is or has recently been in the compound,' said the server. 'You don't match the description we have of the thief, but would you mind submitting to a short test to rule you out as an accomplice? It won't hurt a bit.' Before Ruth had a chance to reply, the server's features dissolved and an image of a glowing red, marble-sized ball appeared in their place. The server held Ruth by the wrist, pressing its cold fingers against her pulse.

'Have you ever seen this?' it asked.

'No,' said Ruth, trying to pull her arm away. But the server kept its tight grip until the picture had disappeared and its features returned.

'You are telling the truth,' it said, letting go and flexing its fingers. Ruth rubbed at her sore wrist. 'No need to worry,' it added. 'We'll find the thief soon and you can get back to your *important work*.'

'Great,' said Ruth. 'Well, glad to be of assistance. I hope you find it.'

The servers stomped out of the canteen and she shuddered. It was wrong to think ill of the dead, she knew, but honestly, if the servers were an accurate reflection of the Dean's personality, she was glad she hadn't got to know him better.

As well as our triumphs, there have naturally been a few disasters along the way! Of course, at SPLURBS, we see the funny side, and always take any hilarious mishaps in our stride. Personally, I always laugh when I think of the time we wasted creating a Galactic Standard Translation of the Holy Book of the insectoid Bal from Bubastis. Too late we discovered that their 'Rule Book' was merely an exceptionally lengthy encyclopedia of facts about the fauna that inhabited that planet and had no religious significance whatsoever.

Funded by SPLURBS: A Brief History of the Society for the Promotion of Lesser-known Religious Belief Systems
Sofia Sophia

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SWAMP WALK

Jack had pulled a pair of heavy-duty waders over his new shoes and tailored trousers but refused to wear the Team Neon hooded vis suit. It was a decision he soon regretted. As he tried to leap over a small boggy patch of ground, in which a butterfly the size of his fist was drowning, he slipped and fell. Leaf mould and mud stuck to his clothes and hands and he came face to face with two small, red wasps, which buzzed straight towards him and landed on each of his beautifully pointed ears. He scrambled to his feet, swatting at them with his hands, then looked around quickly as he recovered his composure to check no-one had seen him.

'I'm fine,' he told the trees, attempting to scrub some of the dirt from his trousers. He opened the small bottle of Wound-Seal that he had pocketed after finding it lying about in the storeroom. Actually, it had been packed tidily in a box with nineteen other bottles, but it was much the same thing, really, he thought. He patted his other pocket to check that the library's Future Retrieval Device was still there. It was. He sprayed both his ears with a liberal dose of Wound-Seal and carried on.

The Bal's village wasn't far from Bright Blessings. Allie had told him it was a twenty-minute walk in the opposite direction from the Cats, but he was pretty sure she had been guessing the timings. Her interest in the Bal was minimal.

He trudged on, fingering the device in his pocket and turning things over in his mind. When he had told Bernice and Ruth in the storeroom that he'd come to find them because he'd got bored, it hadn't been the complete truth. What had really happened was that he had been fiddling with the Device, trying to see if he could open it. He'd wanted to find out what made it tick. Of course, he had realised that playing around with something like that could be extremely dangerous, but Danger was his middle name. Well, one of them anyway. What he hadn't realised was that the device, although seemingly inert, would not only resist his proddings and scannings, but complain by sending out what was obviously a high-pitched distress signal. He had managed to shut it down within seconds, but the damage was done. A few seconds of a signal would be more than enough for Star Seasons to trace. They'd be on Bubastis in a matter of hours. So, he'd decided to find Bernice and Ruth and persuade them to leave this bug-infested planet as soon as possible. They wouldn't wake up, so he'd had to wait.

At first, he'd been worried that Neon would have heard news of the theft from Star Seasons and be looking out for him. But as it became increasingly obvious that she had no interest in anything outside her own little world of Bright Blessings, he had relaxed a little. Then, when he'd been in the corridor with Allie and Bernice, he'd looked out of the window and seen six armed servers circling the compound. He was sure he'd ducked out of sight so fast they hadn't seen him, but he knew it must be him they were after. Star Seasons had sent them to get their property back. Why else would they be here with guns?

Jack was pretty sure that he could bluff his way out of any situation that arose, so long as he didn't actually have the Device on him, so he'd come up with an ingenious plan: hide the evidence, then deny everything. It had worked wonders for him in the past, and had the added advantage that Bernice didn't have to find out what he'd done and wouldn't be able to act all disapproving.

First, he had considered leaving the Device in the storeroom, but that was too obvious. The servers would find it straight away. He decided to hide it further out, in the Bal village. The servers, grouchy personality chips notwithstanding, would think twice about upsetting a whole

village of anti-social insects. Thus the Device would be lost forever, which in Jack's opinion could only be a bonus. If its loss meant that the Experimental Library had to be shut down, well... He'd seen Ruth's freaky reactions to her download, and was pretty sure that the Library was one experiment too far.

Just as he was starting to convince himself that his spur-of-the-moment theft was actually a pretty good deed that he'd done for the universe in general, he saw a figure in the trees ahead. Definitely human, and not making any attempt at camouflage thanks to his orange vis suit, a boy was throwing bits of broken stick into a patch of mud and watching them gloop down under the surface. Tiny grey spotted insects were buzzing excitedly over each bubble that floated to the top.

'Feeding the wildlife?' called Jack. 'What fun!'

The boy jumped to his feet with a look of panic, which changed to relief when he saw Jack. 'You're not a insect,' he said. 'Thank god.'

'If you're looking for non-insects, you really are on the wrong planet,' said Jack. 'I would imagine mammals are outnumbered by about one hundred zillion to one, and that's counting the stone cats on our side.'

The boy made a non-committal noise and looked back at the puddle.

'So, you're on Team Neon, eh?' said Jack.

'Obv,' said the boy, sulkily.

'Obv!' said Jack. 'I'm Jack.'

'My name is not *obv*,' said the boy with a withering stare. 'My name is Rufus.'

'Sorry, Rufus,' said Jack. 'Not down with the slang. Hum...' he cast about for more small talk. 'Lovely day we're having. Weather's just peachy for this type of planet. What are you doing out here?'

'I'm trying to be *alone*,' said Rufus, in a tone that would have made lesser men and women scuttling for the safety of a nice coffee shop.

'Ah yes,' said Jack. 'A bit of the old soul-searching.' Somehow the boy was making him feel that he had aged at least thirty years. He could tell that, in the student's eyes, he was so old that he was nearly dead.

'If you must know,' said Rufus, 'I was excused the prayer meeting, because I was the one who saw the Dean getting killed.'

'Oh,' said Jack. 'That was you, was it? I'm sorry.'

'Mmm,' said the boy.

'Do you want to tell me what happened?'

'Not really,' said Rufus, tapping a stick against his leg in a nervous rhythm. 'Unless you think it might help?'

Jack shrugged. 'They say talking helps,' he said. Truth be told, he was quite curious. 'Is anyone looking after you?' The boy shook his head and suddenly looked so vulnerable that Jack couldn't help thinking how selfish Neon must be to let the boy wander off on his own, when he was obviously in a state of mild shock. Shouldn't she be sending him back to Star Seasons to recover?

'Okay,' said the boy, quickly, as if worried that Jack would change his mind. 'But don't laugh at me or anything, right?'

Jack made sure he looked shocked at the very idea, and Rufus took a deep breath and started talking. 'Well, the Dean wanted a guide to take him to the Cats and I said I'd go because the others were just watching a film and I was bored because I'd seen it before and it wasn't even a good film just one of those ones where the bad guys all wear bright colours so there's no suspense —'

'Pause,' said Jack. 'And focus. So you went to the Cats...'

'Right. And when we were leaving the compound we saw the Ambassador and it wanted to come with us so we said okay and then —'

'Fascinating.'

'What is?'

'That you don't seem to need to pause for breath once you get started. So you went to the Cats...'

'Yeah. And when we got there the Dean was all like, "Ooh aren't they big," and we were all like, "Yeah, they are," and he kept walking round them but he's a bit old and dodderly so he kept holding on to the Ambassador's antennae to support himself but the bug didn't like the touching, I think they have really sensitive antennae and it was trying to be polite, though you could see being touched really made him flinch, but the Dean kept doing it and...'

The boy stopped. The next bit was obviously the nasty part. Jack did his best to arrange his features into a sympathetic listening expression. The boy stared at the boggy puddle and started drumming the stick again.

'Some of the Ambassador's legs started, like, trembling a bit, then after a while they were really shaking and these little spikes started sticking out, and it, like, tried to smooth them down but they always stuck back up again and the Dean didn't notice, just kept hanging onto the Ambassador like it was a walking stick. And then the Dean tripped and fell against the Ambassador and it was like the Ambassador couldn't stop himself, because the spikes just sprang out of all its legs, and they were so long and sharp they sort of shot through the Dean, like Bam! Bam! Bam! And one went through his chest and one went through his leg and one was in his neck and there was... there was all this... Blood.' The boy stopped and looked at Jack. 'I wasn't scared,' he said, bursting into tears.

Jack patted the boy on the shoulder in the way he considered a kindly uncle might.

'It all happened so quickly,' said Rufus, 'then the Ambassador calmed down and started to unpick his spikes and told me to go back to the compound and get help while it waited with the body.'

'That was noble of it,' said Jack.

'I guess,' sniffed the boy. 'Don't tell anyone I cried.'

'I won't,' said Jack. 'But you know, you might want to see a doctor back on Star Seasons. Have you had any meds?' The boy shook his head. 'I think you need something for the shock. You'll have to go back to Bright Blessings and ask Neon. Do you want me to come with you?'

The boy stood up. 'No, I'll go on my own,' he said.

'You do that,' said Jack, feeling pleased that he had helped, but also that he didn't have to keep up the sympathy for much longer.

'Thanks for coming to find me,' said the boy, awkwardly, turning to go.

'Oh,' said Jack, trying to hide his surprise. 'I didn't... I mean... You're welcome.' He watched the boy trudge off in the direction of the compound then set off for the Bal village.

I've heard tell that the base width to height proportions of the Cats match the base height to length proportions of the coastlines of Bubastis's five inhabitable continents. And if that doesn't explain things, then I don't know what does.

Jesse Jo Tells It Like It Is

Jesse Jo Wolftimer

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BAL VILLAGE

For some reason, the word 'village' had conjured up an image in Jack's mind that involved a few little peasantry types living in little huts, tending little animals and having little meetings, yadda, yadda. So, when he reached the moat that surrounded the Bal village, he was a little unprepared.

The moat, filled with boggy water, was at least thirty feet across and noxious. Jack reached gracefully into his muddy breast pocket and pulled out a large patterned neckscarf, which he wrapped around his nose and mouth. Instantly, an irritatingly large flapping insect landed on his face, attracted to the bright colours. It didn't live long.

On the other side of the moat, the Bal village rose from the marshy ground on wooden scaffolding. A teetering bundle of platforms and huts held together by rope bridges, hanging ladders and a gloopy purple paste, it shook in time to the drumming of insect feet. The village was a hive of activity. Above the scaffolding, lines of Bal scurried through the huts and up the ladders carrying crates, boxes and parcels of all shapes and sizes on their backs. Below the scaffolding, Bal workers were sticking, shifting and mending the structure, presumably making sure that the village didn't fall into the swamp. Pipes ran down from the huts above, carrying purple gloop to the workers. The Bal seemed to be literally sucking it out of the pipes, and using it to mend or reinforce the wood.

And that's the trouble with having six legs and no arms right there, thought Jack. Sure, you can kill people with an accidental flick of your pointy spikes, but if you've got no fingers, you have to spit up plaster when you're doing DIY.

One of the Bal on the scaffolding saw Jack and sent a quick succession of clicks to its colleagues further up. The clicks were repeated higher and higher until they reached the topmost hut in the village. This hut had a long tree trunk strapped to its side that stuck high in the air like an empty flag pole. The shutters burst open and two Bal faces peered out. First one, then the other started frantically waving several legs at Jack. He cupped both ears and attempted a look that he hoped was a universal sign for 'I can't hear you'. It seemed to do the trick. Both Bal screamed at the same time and Jack could just make out the faint words: 'Out of way, idiot!'

He leaped backwards, as nimbly as he could in his mud-and-beetle encrusted waders, as the long tree trunk he had thought was a flag pole came crashing towards him. Any part of his suit that had not already been covered in Bubastian flora or fauna was now oozing with swamp mud.

Jack's mind raced. Had they been trying to kill him? No, they had warned him to get out of the way. So this must be... a bridge? One end of the trunk lay in the mud by his feet and the other rested on the walkway that ran all the way round the top hut. The trunk was about the width of his foot, and rose towards the top hut at steep angle. One of the Bal working on the scaffolding sprang nimbly onto it and scuttled a couple of feet forwards and back again by way of demonstration. The barbs on its feet gripped the bark tightly. It waved its antennae in what Jack presumed to be the Bal equivalent of 'ta-dah!'

'Thank you,' said Jack, 'I don't suppose there's a boat?' But the Bal had already turned its attention back to its work. In fact, as Jack peered up and down the village structure, no-one was looking at him any more, except for the two Bal in the top hut. 'All right,' said Jack. 'I'll do it. But I'm going to have to remove my waders.' There was no sign of interest from the Bal. 'Oh, you're

a tough crowd,' he said. 'In some parts of the galaxy the mere *thought* of a glimpse of my toes sends people into swoons of delight.'

Jack pulled off his waders, shoes and socks, placed them neatly on the ground, and stepped out onto the trunk. The bark was grooved in a way that should have allowed for a good grip, but the fact that it was swarming with parasites made it a little tickly. He began to half-climb, half-crawl up the bridge. The tiny insects swarmed up his sleeves and over his arms and started to nip happily at his neck. Wriggling and cursing, he reached the top hut quicker than he might have imagined.

The two Bal emerged onto the walkway and stood, one on either side of the tree trunk. One was larger than the other, and had a greenish tinge to its abdomen.

'Well, I'd say that tree's bite is worse than its bark,' said Jack, stepping gingerly onto the walkway too and slapping at his neck. It was a long way down to the moat from here and he noted there was no handrail. The greener, larger Bal skittered away from him and made a waving movement with four of its legs. Without opening its toothy mouth it hissed a few words at him. Jack listened as hard as he could. It sounded like the Bal was saying 'Twenty-three dogs go to Memphis,' but that couldn't be right.

'Dogs?' he said.

'Doss,' hissed the Bal. 'Twennyfee doss gulas emphass.' It gestured again, pointing to its neck, then patting the air.

'I'm sorry to have to do the standard tourist routine,' said Jack, making his voice slow and loud, 'but can either of you oblige me by talking my language?'

The two Bal conferred for a moment, speaking rapidly to each other and shaking their antennae furiously before coming to a decision. It was obvious they were deciding between themselves who was going to speak to Jack, but it was hard to tell whether both wanted the honour of doing so, or both were trying to wriggle out of it. The larger Bal seemed to win – or lose – and stepped forward, rubbing two of its legs together.

'Why here?' it clicked. 'What want?'

'A chuckle would do,' said Jack. 'I was working on that pun about the bite and the bark all the way across your moat.' The Bal blinked a few eyes. 'But never mind,' said Jack. 'Thanks for talking to me. I must say you're very good at it, which is a relief, because my spoken Bal is *atrocious*. Do you have a year of learning languages tucked away in your lifelong curriculum?'

'Year three,' said the Bal, with a shrug as if it were obvious. 'Modern Languages or History of Theatre option.'

'Oh, then well done for choosing the languages,' said Jack. 'I'm guessing your friend here knows more about set design.'

'Pen-of-my-aunt is on desk-of-my-uncle,' squeaked its companion, collapsing in a heap of nervous giggles.

'No, Blue Shimmer study Languages too,' said the larger Bal. 'But not very clever.'

'I see,' said Jack.

'What want?' asked the larger Bal again.

'Well, I'd love a bath,' said Jack, running his hands over his bedraggled clothes. 'But I'd settle for a nice chat. Hello, my name's Jack.' He held a hand. 'Let me shake your... leg?'

The smaller Bal scuttled backwards behind its colleague.

'Apologies,' said the larger Bal. 'Mammals make Blue Shimmer feel odd. Is phobia. Fine as long as don't touch or move quick.'

'As in xenophobia?' said Jack. 'Or erythrophobia? I know some people really hate my red eyes.'

The larger Bal inched closer and extended a leg. 'Mammals make most Bal queasy,' it said. 'But Green Tinge shake.'

'Well, hello Green Tinge,' said Jack, gently touching the offered appendage. 'Can I call you Green Tinge?'

'Yes, is name,' said the Bal, then pulled its leg back and giggled. 'Tickly!' it said.

'Green Tinge, let's be frank,' said Jack. 'I can't help noticing that you do have a green sort of tinge about your person.'

'Maybe... a little,' said Green Tinge, stroking at its abdomen with its middle legs.

'Charming!' said Jack. 'And Blue Shimmer here?' The smaller Bal turned slightly to show Jack the shiny markings on the end of its wings. 'Of course,' said Jack. 'What a lovely naming custom.'

'Sounds better if not translate,' said Blue Shimmer, a little petulantly. 'Is Vervafellil.' It moved further away from Jack. 'Vervafellil feel sick.'

'Well isn't that strange,' said Jack. 'Now you mention it, you *are* looking a bit peaky. Why don't you go back in your hut and lie down while I ask Greeny here a few questions?'

'Can't question here,' said Blue Shimmer. 'This *lookout* tower. For *lookout*. Meeting rooms for talking.'

'Oooh,' squeaked the other Bal, excitedly. 'Green Tinge take to meeting rooms? Please?' Jack got the uncomfortable impression that its tone was similar to the one a child would use to ask 'Can I keep him as a pet?'

'Suppose,' said Blue Shimmer. 'But go straight and stay not long. Ugh. And keep away from children.'

As they climbed down the ladder from the lookout hut and followed an intricate maze of walkways and platforms, Jack's feet slipped on steps that were designed for creatures with a lot more legs than him. Green Tinge, for all its bravado at shaking hands, was now making scrupulously sure that it didn't touch Jack and wouldn't lend a leg to help him up any of the trickier parts of the structure. Jack became aware that his presence seemed to make every Bal he passed more than a little on edge. Some shuddered when they saw him, others drew back against the side of the huts, and a couple actually gave a sort of horrified scream.

'Do *any* of you feel comfortable around people without antennae?' asked Jack.

'Green Tinge thinks mammals *cool*,' said Green Tinge proudly, glancing quickly at Jack to see if he looked impressed. 'But most not like fleshy-two-eyes. Mammals unnatural. Only four legs! Make anyone squeamish.'

'Four legs?' said Jack. Green Tinge gestured at Jack's arms. 'Oh, I see.' He was beginning to arrive at the assumption that the year of watchtower-duty belonged to Bal in the earlier part of their lives.

By the time they reached the meeting hut, Jack was out of breath. Green Tinge seemed irritatingly refreshed and perky.

'We here,' said Green Tinge, scuttling through the low doorway of the meeting hut. 'What questions?'

'Well,' said Jack. 'I am looking for a lady.'

Green Tinge smiled politely. 'Is year of mating?' it asked.

'Always,' Jack grinned back, flashing the whites of his teeth.

Green Tinge gave a confused click.

'Sorry,' said Jack. 'I'd love to discuss the possibilites of such a year, but time and termite wait for no man. I'm looking for a *specific* lady, called Mina Gloap. She's gone missing.'

'Understand!' Green Tinge looked relieved. 'But why ask Bal?'

'Well, you've got to start somewhere,' said Jack.

Green Tinge cocked its head to one side and hissed. 'Green Tinge heard can attract humans use food and loud noise as bait,' it said. 'Then trap in large, glass jar.'

'Top tip,' said Jack. 'Thanks. What I mean is, have you seen a lone female anywhere near here, possibly in distress?'

'No, no, no,' said Green Tinge. 'No mammals here. Bal see mammal, Bal...' it waved its legs around looking for the right word.

'Avoid them?' asked Jack, wearily.

'Yes,' said Green Tinge. 'Bal saying: "If ignore mammal, mammal leave Bal alone too."'

'That is the least apt saying I've heard in a long while,' said Jack. 'Mammals are vicious. Although, you've probably not met any that aren't tourists or archaeologists, have you? So I suppose you've got off quite lightly.' He was already scoping out the meeting room for hiding places for the Device, but it was annoyingly empty. Hanging from the ceiling were hundreds of lengths of rope. Jack guessed they were for Bal to dangle from while meetings took place, thus doubling the capacity of the room. The walls were sticky, held together by the purple gloop the builders had been using on the scaffolding, and Jack noticed hundreds of tiny flies trapped in it.

'Is that lunch?' he asked, pointing at the struggling insects.

Green Tinge looked at Jack in horror, its antennae bobbing in agitation. Then it gave a long, slow hiss of relief. 'I think, ha-ha, you joke?'

Jack looked at the Bal, curiously. 'Sure,' he ventured, to be on the safe side.

'Yes, ha-ha, mammal joke,' said Green Tinge, relieved. 'Remember Bal Rule Book. No eat insects.'

'I knew that,' said Jack casually. He hadn't had a clue, but then again, he had no intention of eating any insects during his stay on this planet, so the rule was redundant. Anyway, his mind was on other things. He needed to get rid of the Bal before he could stash the Device, but he couldn't think of any excuse, unless he went for the obvious. Oh hell, why not?

'I'm sorry, do you have a toilet?' Jack asked.

Green Tinge fluttered its wings for a second. 'Is through there,' it said hesitantly, using two of its arms to point at an archway. 'But *you* can't use. I think... wrong shape.'

'No problem,' said Jack, gallantly. 'I *do* need to go though, Greeny. Luckily, I always carry a small pot with me for such emergencies.' He didn't. 'And you know how we mammals need privacy when we use our traditional small pots...' He gave Green Tinge a complicit wink, bargaining on the young Bal being out of its depth but not wanting to lose face.

'Yes, yes,' said the Bal, starting to scurry away. 'Green Tinge wait outside.'

Jack looked round the hut again quickly. He didn't have much time. He crossed over to the archway Green Tinge had pointed out and had a cautious look inside. The Bal toilet was another circular hut, stuck on the side of the meeting hut with spit and wood and purple gloop. There were lots of cup-like containers attached to the walls at various intervals, which made Jack think of nesting boxes, except for the series of pipes that led down from each one to a large box in the centre of the room, which could only be some sort of waste tank.

'Oh, lovely,' he said with a smile. 'In fact, it would be rude not to.' Jack pulled the Future Retrieval Device from his pocket, took aim and tossed it gently into the top of one of the containers. It disappeared neatly inside and Jack heard it clonking down the pipe below towards the tank, never to be seen again. Perfect.

'Are all right?' came Green Tinge's distant voice.

'All done,' said Jack cheerfully, moving back into the room.

Green Tinge giggled as it sidled back into the room. 'Green Tinge see pot?' it asked.

'Certainly not.'

Green Tinge looked put out. 'Fine,' it hissed. 'More questions for Green Tinge or leave village?'

'Ah yes,' said Jack. 'Questions. Like... er...' He was saved by the blip of the comms in his pocket. He pulled it out and glanced at the screen. 'Sorry, Greeny babe, can I just get this?' He

held up the comms and put on his cheeriest voice. 'Hello Ruth,' he said. 'How nice of you to call. Would you like to ask me how I am?'

'Not really,' came the voice from the comms. 'Where are you?'

'Not telling,' said Jack. 'Unless you ask me how I am.' The comms crackled. Jack turned the box over and looked in distaste at the flying creature that had somehow lodged half its body in the mechanism. 'I need those three little words that show you care,' said Jack.

'How. Are. You?' asked Ruth in a way that made Jack think she was gritting her teeth.

'Covered in mud and slime and bugs and chatting to a teenage mammalophile on a teetering tower of wood and spit,' said Jack. 'It's utterly awful. And there's no sign of Mina,' he added as an afterthought.

'Don't worry about Mina,' said Ruth.

'Worry?' said Jack. 'I wasn't particularly worried. But I was under the impression we were supposed to be looking for her.'

'Not any more,' said Ruth. 'That's what I called to say. She's just turned up at the compound. She's *here*.'

When the first ones appeared, no-one noticed. Their red eyes and blue shells were distinctive, but there were so many new species evolving that nobody paid any attention. Some had life cycles that only lasted a few hours. Generations poured over you in the course of a day, and you couldn't help but snap at them as they went past. Some were hard with soft insides that burst into your mouth when you bit them. Some were fleshy with spines along their backs that prickled at your tongue as you chewed. Some had gauzy wings that crackled in your throat. It took a while before we started to think about what we were eating.

An Imagined History of Ancient Bubastis
Silver Engel Bellfield

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MINA GLOAP

Mina Gloap sat on a sofa in a corner of the canteen, surrounded by a group of students. Ruth wasn't sure she would have recognised her from the photo cube she had seen in Bil's office. The jewellery had gone and the spiky orange crop of hair was brown with mud, but there was a far more dramatic change. Mina's peachy skin was now a milky shade of blue. Ruth gulped, trying not to stare too hard. The expression on Mina's face was hard to put a name to.

'She's *totally* blissed out,' breathed Allie. Mina's eyes were glazed and unfocused, but the corners of her mouth twitched happily upwards. Every now and then she gave a contented sigh – which was strange, considering the state she was in.

Every inch of Mina's skin was covered in insect bites of varying sizes. Some were tiny as pin-pricks, others large, raw lumps. One of the students, Jenny, was kneeling on the floor beside her, dabbing at the bites with a pad soaked in lotion. She stopped as a cry came from the back of the room.

'Miiiiinaaaaaa!'

Neon Tsara pushed her way through the huddled students to Mina's side. She reached out her arms to embrace the girl, then withdrew slightly, her eyes darting from bruise to sore along her bitten arms, neck and face.

'Hey, Neon,' smiled Mina dreamily. 'Did you miss me?'

'Oh, Mina,' gasped Neon. 'What a question.' She turned to the rest of the students. 'I haven't stopped talking about you since you left, isn't that right?' There was a general murmur of assent from the crowd.

Liars, thought Ruth.

'But what happened?' asked Neon. 'Where've you been?'

'I got a bit lost,' said Mina, with a spaced-out grin.

'Personally, I always knew you were fine,' said Neon. 'But other people have been *frantic*. Your uncle sent a search party.' She turned to Ruth. 'I told you there was nothing to worry about,' she scolded.

'She's *blue*,' said Ruth. 'Quite frankly, I'd worry.'

'Shhhh!' said Neon, glancing at Mina with a horrified expression.

'Don't worry, Neon. I know I'm blue,' said Mina. 'It's really fine. I feel wonderful. Really, *really* wonderful.' She swayed her head and shoulders from side to side in a little dance.

'And I'm guessing,' added Ruth, 'she's not normally this out of it?' There was a murmur from the students, although it was hard to tell whether they were agreeing or disagreeing. 'Either way,' said Ruth. 'I think she needs to see a doctor. When Benny gets back we can take her to Star Seasons.'

There was a banging from underneath the canteen, and a shout that Ruth could tell instantly belonged to a very angry woman. The hatch slammed open and Bernice Summerfield was thrust up into the room. She staggered, falling on the floor, followed by three servers.

'Stop *pushing* me,' she yelled. 'I warned you...' She stopped, taking in the scene. 'Mina?' She stared at the girl. 'Ruth? Is *that* Mina?'

Ruth took hold of Bernice's arm and lifted her to her feet. 'I tried to call you but I couldn't get through,' she whispered.

'The comms is full of flies,' said Bernice, unable to drag her eyes off the blue figure on the chair. 'Is she okay? Are *you* okay?'

'I'm okay. Well, mostly.' Ruth squeezed Bernice round the waist and they gave each other a brief hug.

'Everyone's okay,' said Neon. 'Super.' She turned to the servers. 'Did you get the murderous bug?'

'Yes, ma'am,' said one server. 'It was at the scene of the crime. We brought it back here.'

'In a particularly violent fashion,' said Bernice. 'If a human rights representative had been there they would have been appalled.'

'Insect rights,' said a student, getting a laugh.

'They're still people,' said Bernice.

'People *killers*,' said the student.

'That's enough, Dave,' said Neon. 'Where is the bug?'

'Here,' said the server, and reached down through the hatch, pulling up the net containing the unconscious body of Ambassador Grey Line.

'So we won't be able to question it just yet then,' said Neon.

'They shot it,' said Bernice, indignantly. 'Maybe someone could take a look at its... its abdomen? Does anyone know Bal physiology?'

'I do,' said the server. 'And I told you already, it's fine, for goodness' sake. The shot was to the lower abdomen, which contains no vital organs, and will heal in hours. The unconscious state will facilitate the healing.'

Bernice frowned. 'Well, at least you could make it comfortable?' she said.

'Professor Summerfield,' said Neon. 'It's so good to have you with us again. Really, it is. Maybe sometime soon, you can explain exactly why you are more interested in looking after a murderer than the girl that you were so *desperate* to find.'

Ruth winced. It was a fair point. Well, sort of.

Bernice pulled three cushions off the sofa behind her and thrust them at the nearest server. 'I'm not asking for much,' she said, then turned her attention to the blue girl. 'Mina,' she said gently. 'I'm a friend of your uncle. He's been terribly worried.'

'I'm fine,' said the girl, dreamily. '*Super* fine.'

'But you've been missing for days,' said Bernice. 'Were you in the swamps all that time?'

'The beautiful swamps,' said Mina happily. 'Yes.'

'You must be starving,' said Neon, suddenly. 'Can I get you a sandwich? A hot drink?' She waved at one of the students. 'Don't just stand there. She's in shock! She needs something hot and sweet.'

'I'm not hungry,' said Mina. 'I've just eaten.'

'Eaten?' echoed Neon. 'You poor darling, what did you *eat*? Was it something in the swamp? Is that why you're looking so off-colour?'

The server had placed the cushions on the floor next to the Ambassador's net. Ruth noticed that the insect was starting to stir, kicking at one of them with its lower leg. Several of its front eyes fluttered open. 'Attack,' it said, feebly.

'Shush,' said the server next to him, giving him a prod with its boot.

'There's lots to eat out there,' said Mina. 'The swamp is literally *crawling* with food, you know.'

'Crawling, darling?' said Neon. 'You don't mean...' She laughed her tinkling laugh and nudged one of the students beside her. The student smiled, looking embarrassed and a little pleased that Neon had picked him out.

Ruth was watching the Ambassador. The spikes along its legs were starting to quiver. It was listening. Oh, Neon, she thought, be quiet.

'It sounds like she ate insects,' said Dave.

There was a sound like a whip uncurling as the Ambassador took an unsteady step to its feet, the spikes along his legs standing straight, pointing out like daggers and shaking furiously. The net was shredded in an instant.

Every single one of its eyes was open now and they were all fixed on Mina Gloap. 'Did you?' it hissed. 'Eat insects?'

Mina's smile lazily floated across her face again. 'Only the big, squishy ones,' she said. 'The little flying ones were too quick to catch. But the big ones were delicious. Sort of sweet...'

With another whip-crack, the Ambassador took a trembling step forward. Its whole body was shaking, bristles glistening with fury.

'Oh no,' said Ruth a little desperately.

'What's happening?' asked Bernice under her breath.

'I think she's broken the Bal's number one rule.'

'I'm sorry,' said Neon. 'Let's all focus. What's going on here?'

'I wasn't expecting them to taste nice,' said Mina, seemingly oblivious to the threat, 'I just wanted to get high.' She laughed. 'But it was an added bonus when those funny-looking waspy things tasted like cocoa.'

'You wanted to "get high"?' asked Bernice, all too aware that she sounded like someone's mother. 'Mina Gloap, your uncle thought you had come here to work.'

Mina giggled. 'Oh, bless Uncle Bil,' she said. 'He's such a sweetie, I'm ever so fond of him. But he should know giant stone cats aren't my thing.'

'And eating alien insects is?' said Bernice, incredulously.

'Is that why you were making notes in the Rule Book?' asked Ruth. 'You were trying to work out which bugs would get you stoned?'

Mina nodded her head. 'It's ever so useful,' she said. 'It tells you everything you need to know. And you know what's funny? They say not to eat them, but you can tell from the way they describe them that someone must have tasted them at some point... Hey, what's that?'

There was a hiss of gas, and an intense, blue smoke started to fill the room. It didn't take long to realise that it was coming from under the Ambassador's wings.

'Stop talk!' screamed the Ambassador as the students started to cough, holding on to each other in surprise. 'Bad talk. Rule broken. All die! Die! Die!'

The servers raised their guns to point at the Ambassador's twitching head, and looked to Neon to give them the nod. But Neon wasn't watching; she had fallen on her knees and was crawling in an ungainly way towards the nearest door.

'Now plague come,' clicked the Ambassador, trembling violently. 'Plague whispers in trees. Plague gurgles in swamps. Plague sings in nurseries of young.'

'It's gone all poetic,' said Mina, enthusiastically, blissfully unaware. 'Tell us more, man.'

There was silence while every human in the room prayed for the girl to shut up, and the Ambassador considered its reply. It drew itself up to its full height, and quivered. 'Six plague signs lead to insanity,' it said. 'Like ancient rhyme.' Then it shut half its eyes and recited in a strange, halting rhythm:

'Eyes split and shrunken.

Skin colour of the sky.

Leg-ends useless and lumpen.

Voices shrill and too high.

Deadly shakes come on.

Steam rises. Mind is gone.'

Mina, who had been listening with rapt attention, leaned back in her chair and slowly started to laugh. She put a hand up to her mouth, but the laugh spread, spilling out and filling the room as the others looked at her in horror.

'Mina, shut up,' said a student. 'You'll get us all killed. You're acting crazy.'

'Girl crazy?' clicked the Bal. 'Girl have plague! You see? See! All die. All die.'

The Ambassador's not threatening to kill us, thought Ruth suddenly. It's saying that there's a *plague* that's going to kill us. Had anyone else realised this? She glanced round the room at the terrified students, and Mina's strange, grinning face.

'Grey Line go to village and gather Bal.' The Ambassador made a sudden move towards the hatch. With a quick flick it rotated its body so that the hard shell knocked into the person nearest the hatch, pushing them through. It was Bernice. She fell to the ground below with a thump, followed by the Bal.

'Hey!' she yelled. 'I'm on your side! Maybe. Well, I'm not on anyone's side.'

'Stay away or Grey Line kill with spikes,' said the Bal.

'Classic hostage scenario,' said Neon, from under a table. 'Let them go.'

There was a click as the servers lowered the guns. One of the students gave a little scream, and ran for the door to the dormitory. Mina laughed and Ruth tensed her body, ready to fight or run – but the Bal was gone. And so was Bernice. Then there was a sickening tearing sound from the clearing outside. Ruth looked out of the window and saw that a small section of the nose of Irving's shuttle had been ripped open and sparking wires were hanging out.

'Was that our escape vessel?' asked Allie, clutching Ruth's arm in horror. 'Are we stuck here? It's like a film where everyone's waiting for it to get dark to get picked off one by one.'

The student next to her whimpered and sank down to his knees. Mina laughed again.

A head popped up through the swinging hatch.

'Hi guys,' said Jack. 'Did I miss anything?'

Neon staggered to her feet and hurled herself towards the hatch, her eyes huge and red-rimmed from the smoke. 'Oh Jack, my angel. Oh Jack, help me. Hold me.' She threw down her arms and half dragged him up the steps into the canteen. Jack looked at Ruth with an expression of mild amusement. Ruth glared back. Neon pressed herself against him, despite his covering of mud and leaf litter. 'Things will be all right now we're together,' she mumbled into his chest.

'Of course they will,' said Jack. 'Why are those servers pointing guns at me?'

Neon raised her eyes to the servers in surprise. 'Yes, why are you doing that?' she asked, angrily.

'Humblest apologies etc,' said the server at the front. 'Your "angel" is under arrest.'

'Don't be absurd,' Neon said, standing up straight and wiping the tears defiantly from her eyes. 'You are programmed to protect me. You should be going after that murderous *bug*, not arresting innocent people.'

'The new order from Star Seasons has equal priority status,' said the server. 'That man exactly matches a description of the one wanted for questioning in relation to a theft at Star Seasons. My orders are to escort him there immediately, and I fully intend to follow them. In fact, I have contacted Star Seasons and requested a transporter to arrive tomorrow morning. I will leave behind other servers to support you.'

'Cancel the request,' snapped Neon.

'Not a chance,' said the server. 'That man is my prisoner.'

Jack pulled his most innocent face, and pointed at his chest, mouthing: *Me?*

'Oh come on now,' said Neon, pulling Jack into a sort of half-hug. 'I need him. We have a situation that needs sorting.'

'Yes,' said Ruth, quickly, seeing her chance. 'I agree completely. We need to rescue Benny of course, but also we need to barricade the compound to protect ourselves in case the Bal turn nasty, and someone needs to look after Mina until she can see a doctor. So let's try to sort out this misunderstanding about Jack quickly and we can get on.'

'So practical!' said Neon with a tinkly laugh. 'But I wasn't thinking anything like that.' She waved a hand at the servers. 'What I meant was, we've still got a Cat to commune with.'

'I'm sorry?' said Ruth.

'I've spent weeks creating a mental state that's sympathetic to my lucky-fingered Cat, and I am now finally in a position to receive its message,' said Neon, with a strange glint in her eyes. 'I know there's something inside that statue, and I intend to find out what it is.'

'I'm not sure that's a priority...' started Ruth.

'*Nothing* is more important,' said Neon, hugging Jack closer. 'My name will be inextricably linked to the Cats for the rest of history. But don't worry, I won't hog all the glory. If you help me, I'll make sure you get a mention in the press...'

'Us too?' said Ruth with a laugh. 'Don't forget the students. You've promised them a slice of the glory too for their so-called help.'

'Are you implying they don't help?' said Neon, angrily. 'They are my *team*. This wouldn't be a proper expedition without a *team*.'

Ruth realized that she had hit a nerve. Of course Neon wanted this to look like a 'proper' expedition. She couldn't find any professionals who would work with her, so she'd recruited students with promises of wealth and fame instead. No doubt, she'd paid Star Seasons incredibly well to back her in a desperate attempt to add an air of respectability to the expedition.

'What about Gregory and your old team?' asked Ruth.

Neon stuck out her bottom lip. 'We had a disagreement over method.'

'Method?' said Ruth.

'Method,' said Neon, airily. 'He didn't think it was a good idea to use Tsara bombs on the Cats, even when I told him I had access to an unlimited number.'

'Hold up,' said Jack, struggling free from Neon's grasp. 'What? They're illegal. And hard to come by even by Legion's standards.' He turned to Ruth. 'They're hugely expensive, incredibly unsafe and only available on the black market.'

'They are *not* unsafe,' said Neon, tightening her lips. 'And it's illegal to sell them, but it wasn't illegal to invent them. My father was careful never to be caught *manufacturing*.'

'Oh,' said Jack. 'You are the heir to the Tsara bomb millions are you? I thought your name sounded familiar. My goodness, Neon, when you said you wanted to get inside the Cats, I didn't think you meant you were going to literally blow them up.'

'What did you think I meant?'

'Hang on a second,' said Ruth. 'I have no idea what either of you are talking about any more. What's a Tsara bomb when it's at home?'

'It's an explosive,' said Jack.

'Why are they illegal?' asked Ruth.

'A travesty of justice,' said Neon, smoothly. 'That silly judge had no idea what he was talking about. Tsara bombs are the cleanest type of detonation you can buy. The explosion occurs with a safety bubble, and everything inside it just burns away as the bubble vanishes. No mess, no rubble, no dust. My father invented them for use on demolition sites.'

'And I'll bet that's exactly what the people who scour the black market for them use them for,' said Jack, soothingly. 'I'm sure Daddy Dearest knows best.'

Neon's face flushed and suddenly she looked angrier than Ruth had thought possible. 'I think I was wrong about you, Jack,' she said, coldly. 'And the servers were right after all.' She stepped away from him, holding out her hands. 'Take him to the storeroom until the transporter comes,' she demanded. Two of the servers stepped forward and grabbed Jack under the armpits.

‘Are you out of your mind?’ yelled Ruth. ‘Leave him alone! You need to rescue Benny, not blow things up!’

‘Take her too,’ said Neon, gesturing at the server. ‘Lock them both in one of the storerooms.’

Naturally, many explanations have been offered for the Cats' extraordinary rows of fingers. In this book however, I take as a starting point Johnson's claim that that they were used for display purposes during a mating ritual (ibid). I propose to take this theory further, and as such will be exploring in details the many different ways that these extra fingers could be used during the act of mating over the rest of this book.

Censored Books of the Twenty-Fifth Century

Nikki Lee

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

STOREROOM THREE

It wasn't the first time that Ruth had been locked in a storeroom since meeting Bernice, and it probably wouldn't be the last. But this time was rather unusual in that she was far more annoyed with the person who was locked in with her than she was with those who had done the locking-in. She searched along the shelves and emptied out neatly packed boxes of provisions – looking for something to help them escape – with far more crashing and bashing than was strictly necessary. Jack was sitting on a stack of boxes, snacking on a packet of dried fruit and looking contrite.

'So, you stole the most expensive thing on Star Seasons and decided not to say,' Ruth said. 'I knew you were acting weird.'

'I had a lot on my mind,' said Jack. 'Anyway, I didn't steal. It was an accident.'

'Oh, of course it was,' said Ruth. She rummaged through a box of labels and pens, realised that it was of no use at all and threw it angrily on the floor. Pink fluoro pens rolled around Jack's feet and he picked one up and tucked it in his pocket. 'And I suppose that was too?' she snapped.

Jack patted his pocket. 'Borrowing a pen from your evil captors doesn't count,' he protested. 'Taking the Device was a spur of the moment kind of thing, and I'm a spur of the moment kind of guy.'

'So that would explain why we've been locked up on the spur of the moment and are unable to rescue Benny from some angry insects.'

'I suppose so,' said Jack, jumping to his feet and clearing up the pens. 'But let me ask you one question...' Ruth stopped rummaging in a box of computer parts and looked at him, waiting. 'What did the Nobal's behinds look like?'

Ruth gasped as if she had been winded and leaned heavily against the wall as she caught her breath. She pressed her fingers to her forehead. 'I think they had tails,' she said. 'Ouch. Jack, that really hurts.'

'Sorry, Ruthie. I was trying to prove a point,' said Jack.

'Which is?' asked Ruth, keeping her eyes squeezed shut in pain. 'It had better be good, because it feels like it ripped parts of my skull open.'

'That I didn't plan to take the Device, but it's better that it's gone,' replied Jack, simply. 'That Library is dangerous, just look at yourself. And all I did was ask a simple, comedy question on the subject of your choice.' Ruth grimaced and tried to stop rubbing at her head. 'It's a good job only you and Bil have used the Library so far, because neither of you were clever enough to think about what you were doing.'

'Oi,' said Ruth.

'Look at the facts,' said Jack. 'He unlocked some book of poetry written by a future Bernice Summerfield, and you've downloaded the history of a boring unknown race. What a *normal* person would do...' He stopped, indicating that by normal he meant himself, '...is look up winning lottery numbers for the following week. I mean that's just basics. Time Travel 101.'

'Can we stop talking about it,' said Ruth, 'and try to get out of here? I have a really bad headache and I'm worried about Benny.' She picked up two food containers and weighed them in her hands. 'Anyway, I'm going to smash a window.'

'Not a chance,' said Jack. 'This compound was designed to withstand dangerous environments. The windows are unbreakable.'

'Well, the bugs still get in somehow,' said Ruth, moving out of the way as a wriggling beetle scuttled out of a box.

'They get in when the doors are opened,' said Jack.

'Well, thank you, Mr Clever,' said Ruth. She chose the can labelled 'Star Seasons Pickled Fish' and hurled it at the window. It bounced harmlessly back and crashed into a box of pudding mix on the floor. Outside the compound, night had fallen. In the dark she could see Neon organising lamps and other equipment for the servers to carry. There were no students with her.

'Hey,' Ruth said. 'She's really going to do it.'

'I don't know why you care,' said Jack.

'Oh Jack, don't be so silly. You're meant to preserve ancient monuments, not blow them up.'

'Says you,' said Jack. 'But I'm sure if you compared a larger range of attitudes, you'd find all sorts of ideas. Some people destroy ancient monuments, some rebuild them, some worship them. Others – ha! – take the Bal for example, they just ignore them. But let's not talk about the Bal.'

'Why not?' asked Ruth.

'I'm being nice,' said Jack innocently, popping another piece of dried fruit into his mouth. 'I don't want to set off another brain spasm.'

'My brain is not spasming,' said Ruth. 'Anyway, I don't know anything about the *Bal*, remember?'

She picked up another large container of food, this time with a picture of a cat under the Star Seasons logo. Cat food? Was Neon feeding the statues? Ruth wouldn't put it past her. She heaved it at the window. It smashed back to the floor punctured, brown powder pouring out onto the floor. The window didn't even dent. Jack hopped off his crate and tapped her on the nose. 'Can I have a go at throwing something?' he asked. 'Only it does look like *fun*.'

'Be my guest,' said Ruth, miserably. 'But you're right, the window's unbreakable.'

Jack picked up a can and got ready to hurl it then stopped. 'Or...' he said slowly. 'Oh, yes, I am a genius. Or we don't need to break any windows at all. Because what do you always get in a room full of cans?'

'I don't know,' said Ruth. 'On Bubastis, probably a massive can-eating cockroach.'

'Nearly,' said Jack. 'The answer is a can-opener.' He started to look along the shelves. 'That cat food was in a hydrocan, and if I can't get the storeroom door open using a hydrocan-opener then I will lick that powdered cat food from the floor.'

'Either way I'm a winner then,' said Ruth. 'Tell me what one looks like and I can help you find it.'

'It should be about the size of my hand,' said Jack, rummaging through a box. 'In the shape of a letter C, with a tiny flame thrower at one end.' He caught sight of Ruth's disbelieving look. 'It's a clever bit of kit,' he said. 'The hydrocan's lid is made of some kind of icy stuff which dissolves into the powdered contents, hydrating and heating it at the same time.' He made a sudden dive into a box, threw half its contents onto the floor, then came up holding up the gadget with an insufferably smug expression on his face. 'Ta-dah!'

'Go on then,' said Ruth. 'Open the door with a can-opener.'

'With pleasure,' said Jack. And he did. For some reason, it made Ruth even angrier with him than she had been before.

Personally, I am convinced that the Cats were not mammals of any kind but an unusual type of insect with long fingers, native only to Bubastis.

Mysteries Simplified: In An Instant! Book III
Juno Sydney

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

PUNISHMENT

‘Ew!’ said Ruth, as a huge beetle blundered into her ear. She swatted at it in disgust and carried on squelching through the night. Her stolen vis suit was now as dirty as Jack’s, thanks to one stumble over a sleeping beetle the size of a brick and an awkward slip into a puddle of something foul-smelling and mushy.

She was still feeling slightly annoyed with Jack so, rather than talking to him, she had been trying to work out what Neon could possibly hope to find inside the Cat. So far, she’d come up with: treasure and jewels (too obvious); ghosts (unlikely surely, even for someone like Neon); weapons (no, Neon seemed to have access to enough of these already); some kind of super power (getting desperate now); or a major archaeological coup, in the form of carvings and artifacts. Ruth sighed. The latter was the most likely, of course, and had the advantage of being a clear ‘message’ from the Cat – the message being something along the lines of Neon being the most amazing archaeologist who ever lived, as proved by her ability to discover all this great stuff.

Ruth smelt the moat that ran around the Bal village before she saw it. The net that hung from the hood of her vis suit protected her face from flying insects, but could not stop her from gagging at the boggy stench of the standing water. The village was still as a stone, with not a single Bal to be seen or heard.

‘Are we here?’ she asked, when she’d recovered herself a little, looking at the moat in distaste. ‘Is it meant to keep the Bal in or out?’

‘A more relevant question is: Are they in or out right now?’ said Jack, examining the precarious tower of huts. ‘I can’t see any lights on. When I was here before, the whole structure was alive with hundreds of little Bal living their little Bal lives. They were everywhere – on the bridges, the scaffolding, the roofs...’ He paused, looking directly at Ruth. ‘So are they all back at Bright Blessings killing everyone in sight, or are they in a secret hideout *preparing* to attack Bright Blessings and kill everyone in sight?’

There was a rustling in the trees above them and both Ruth and Jack jumped back nervously.

‘You’re just trying to spook me,’ said Ruth, with a forced laugh. ‘Maybe they’re all in bed. Or they decided to go on holiday.’

‘That’s a much better explanation,’ said Jack in his sweetest voice. ‘Well done you.’

‘I try,’ said Ruth. ‘Anyway, if they’ve left the village, what do you think they’ve done with Benny?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Jack. ‘It depends what sort of mood she was in I suppose. Sometimes I think she’d be the best holiday companion ever. But if she was in one of her *other* moods I’d definitely abandon her at left luggage.’

The trees above them rustled again and a large stick whistled down, narrowly missing Jack’s ear.

‘Do you know,’ said Jack, taking a step backwards. ‘It’s almost as if that tree did that on purpose.’

‘Psssst,’ said the tree.

‘And now it sounds as if it’s talking,’ said Jack. ‘Hello, Tree! How’s tricks?’

‘Oh, for god’s sake,’ said the tree.

‘You sound remarkably familiar, Tree,’ Jack said.

There was a whispery sort of curse from above them, then the voice said: 'Look *up*, you stupid idiot.'

'How do you know my name?' asked Jack, rapping the tree with his knuckles. But Ruth was already pulling at the foliage above them and peering up through the gloom.

Bernice was trapped in a wooden cage, hanging from a branch midway up the tree. It was too small for her to stand, so she was sitting hunched up with her back pressed against the bars, her feet buried in piles of blue paper. She waved and Ruth felt a tumble of relief that her friend was unharmed.

'Benny, are you all right?' she asked.

'I'm fine,' said Bernice. She held up a half-eaten bowl of slimy green liquid. 'They even gave me soup. But you know, I'm still glad to see you, and all that. Feel free to get me down as quickly as you can.'

Ruth started to climb the tree. 'Good thing we brought the can-opener,' she said.

'Do you know how to use that thing?' asked Bernice, unsure what to make of the device her friend was wielding.

'I watched Jack,' said Ruth. 'How hard can it be?' She aimed it at the lower bars of the cage and they began to froth and dissolve. Bernice shuffled away towards the other end of the cage and started to collect up the pieces of paper.

'What have you been doing with all that paper?' Ruth asked, aiming the can-opener further along the bar.

'Penance,' said Bernice, with a grimace. She waggled a plastic covered book at her friend. 'The Bal said I had to stay here until I'd copied out the whole of their Rule Book.'

'Ah,' said Ruth, getting to work on the next bar. 'And how is that going for you?'

'I'm about a quarter of the way through,' Bernice replied. 'No idea what I'm writing about though. Apparently Galactic Standard Translations do exist, but this is written in Bal.'

'Bal?' Jack raised an eyebrow.

'Bal-ish? Bal-ease? Bal-ian? I didn't think to ask what their language was called, Jack. I was too busy shouting things like "Hey, don't put me in this cage."'

'Understandable,' said Jack, soothingly. 'I must say it looks like you've been writing pretty fast though. That's one hefty book.'

'The incentive to get it done was quite high,' said Bernice, testily. 'This cage is more than a little cramped and I keep getting bitten by things.'

'We've bought you a vis suit,' said Ruth, as the next bar frothed away under her can-opener. 'There you go. That's big enough for you to fit through, right?'

Gingerly, Bernice struggled towards the hole in the bottom of the cage and reached for Ruth's hand. 'My fingers are really stiff,' she said, flexing them. 'I'm not used to actual *writing* writing. You know, with a pen.' Holding onto Ruth, she swung down and grasped the nearest branch of the tree, then slid into Jack's waiting arms. Blue paper covered with messy handwriting fluttered down around her head.

'Ah, solid, marshy ground,' she said happily, scratching at the bites on her arms. 'I would kiss it if it wasn't so muddy. And, you know, if there wasn't a massive ant right there.'

She gestured at the creature, which scurried self-consciously into a bank of reeds. Jack handed her the vis suit and she started to slip it on, gratefully.

'So, what now?' she said, stuffing the Rule Book into Ruth's bag along with handfuls of the blue paper. She caught Jack's amused glance and shook her head. 'Oh no, I'm not leaving this behind. It's taken me *hours*. And you know that if the Bal catch me again, and I don't have it, they'll make me start from scratch.'

'Pessimist,' said Jack.

'I just know how these things turn out,' said Bernice. 'You get caught, you escape, you get caught again... Thinking of which, Jack, you seem remarkably un-arrested. I'm guessing it was all a terrible misunderstanding?'

'Of course,' said Jack, reassuringly. 'So all we need to do now is grab Mina – assuming she's still all happy and blue and alive at Bright Blessings – then drop her off at Star Seasons and get straight back to Legion.'

Bernice raised a questioning eyebrow.

'Er,' said Ruth.

'Er?' asked Bernice, rubbing her stiff legs. 'I heard an "er". What was that for?'

'Nothing,' said Jack, taking hold of Bernice and steering her in the direction of Bright Blessings. 'There's not one good reason to stay on this pestilential planet now that Mina is safe and sound. Isn't that right, Ruthie?'

'Neon's going to blow up one of the Cats,' blurted Ruth.

'Whaaaaat?' Bernice stopped in her tracks, confusion and anger all over her face.

'Well yes, there is *that*. But I reckon they've probably done it by now,' said Jack. 'So we're too late. Tally ho! Let's go! I've had it up to here with the constant threat of arrest and the non-stop buzzing.'

'But that's vandalism. What would make Neon think she could blow up an ancient monument?' asked Bernice.

'Well, in some cultures...' began Jack.

'Not *now*, Jack,' said Ruth, quickly filling Bernice in on Neon's explosive background.

'We've got to stop her,' said Bernice.

'I knew you would say that,' said Jack. 'Which is why many of my friends believe me to have been blessed with the divine gift of second sight.'

Bernice was looking at the heads of the Cats, towering over the trees in the distance. She could still count all five. 'No-one else will stop her. Those over-sexed students are too busy making cow eyes at each other. And the servers are on Neon's side. Someone has to be the voice of reason.'

Jack winced. 'I know, Benny, but why does the voice of reason have to be *us*?'

Bernice was already walking towards the Cats. 'If you disagree with me, Jack,' she said over her shoulder. 'Why are you following me?'

'Bugger,' said Jack, looking down. 'I think it's these shoes.'

The Silver Fall Bug is used by inhabitants of Bubastis as a kind of advance warning system, due to the noise it emits when close to a large group of swarming insects. If you hear any of the following sounds, you would be advised to flee the area immediately:

*umm summ zoum zoum; boon tsiou tsiou;
gut gut csip-csip pio pio piyo piyo pi-pi-pi pi-pi pip-pip*

Trekking the Outer Planets
Anvil Thomas

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CAT TWENTY-THREE

Twenty-three flickering lamps lit up the base of the Cat. It was the furthest of the statues from the compound, its unseeing eyes reaching out into the distance, as they had done for centuries, while Bernice peered from behind a clump of bushes, trying to count its fingers. She was pretty sure that there were eleven on the nearest paw, but it was too dark, and she was too far away, for her to properly count the other one. She wondered if it mattered anyway. Neon was unlikely to change her plans even if Bernice could cast reasonable doubt on the existence of an extra finger. Yet, somewhere in the back of her mind, she was hoping that she'd be able to see something Neon had missed, that the twenty third finger was just a part of the paw, or a carving of an insect, or maybe even a mistake where the sculptor had slipped.

Neon was moving around the statue slowly, sticking what Bernice was sure were charges onto its stone belly in a circle. Every now and then the plump woman stepped back to take a photograph of her handiwork. Six servers were standing in a protective ring around her, backs to the Cat, guns pointing out into the dark trees.

'Leave it to me,' whispered Jack suddenly and, before Bernice could say anything, he was sauntering towards the nearest server with his arms held high in the air. There were a lot of things you could call him, thought Bernice, but 'stupid' and 'brave' sprang to mind so often, she may as well make up a new word. Stuve? Brapid?

The server levelled his gun at Jack's head and told him to stop. Jack stopped. The server grabbed Jack by the arm, keeping its face and body turned in the direction of the trees.

'Neon's expecting me,' Jack said. 'Don't shoot.' He waved at the figure by the Cat. 'Coo-ee! Neon!' he called, disarmingly. 'I couldn't *bear* for us to be apart for so long.'

Neon turned to face him, quickly brushing at her face net to wipe the bugs away. 'Is that you, Jack?' she asked, breathily.

'Not only me,' said Jack. 'Ruth and Benny are here too.'

'Benny?' said Neon. 'But how did you –? How did she –?'

'Shh. There's no time for that,' said Jack. 'But, may I say you look radiant in the dark, even from this distance?'

'Oh, Jack...'

'Can I remind you that this man is wanted for questioning at Star Seasons?' interrupted the server. 'He is under arrest.'

'Oh,' said Neon, pouting. 'Yes, of course he is. But surely there's no reason why he can't be under arrest over here next to me for a little while.'

A frown flickered over the server's silvery face. 'If you say so,' it growled, reluctantly. 'You are well aware that I'm unable to do anything at this exact moment, as the threat posed by the native population requires me to remain in your protective circle. However,' it added, tartly, its gaze never wavering from the dark trees, 'I would like it noted that I suggest securing him to the nearest tree to stop his escape. And I *will* be taking him back to Star Seasons for questioning in the morning.'

'Don't forget who's the boss around here,' growled Neon, and beckoned Jack towards her.

Bernice watched Jack pull free of the server's grip and go to Neon, pressing one finger to her lips through the mesh of her face net. 'We've had a change of heart and we want to help you,' he said. 'Let's all share in your...' He ran his finger along her cheek, '...glory!'

Silently, in the trees, Bernice made a retching face. It was a shameless performance. But Neon gave a girlish giggle.

'I knew it,' she said. 'You couldn't resist the pull of the Cats.'

'Or the pull of a beautiful lady. Could you possibly ask your friend to stop pointing his gun at me?' Jack added. 'It makes me feel a little awkward.'

'Oh Jack, we're alike in so many ways,' murmured Neon.

'So many,' whispered Jack. 'Tell the servers to let Ruth and Benny through.'

'Let the girls in,' Neon said to the server. 'They're not under arrest, are they? It's those damn bugs we need to watch out for.'

'Thank you,' said Jack, with an elaborate bow.

'Don't forget I have a gun too,' said Neon, waving her sidearm. 'So, no funny business.'

Bernice and Ruth made their way past the servers and stood in the circle of lamplights. Bernice nodded grimly at the other archaeologist – although she was having problems thinking of her in those terms. 'Neon,' she said tersely.

'So glad you've come to watch,' said Neon. 'It's much better to have an audience of *real* people at the most important moment of your career.' She waved a hand at the Cat.

The Tsara bombs were all in place, Bernice could see that. Twenty-three (of course) little black boxes had been stuck on to the Cat's belly, like grotesque leeches, waiting for Neon to detonate them. I have to find out how she's going to set them off, thought Bernice, looking around for something that might give her a clue. If I can work out what it is, then I can stop it. She couldn't see any wires running along the ground, no boxes with a handy 'Press Here' sign. She reluctantly ran her eyes up and down Neon's bright vis suit to see if she could see any lumps that might be a detonator in the pockets. Nothing. She needed to stall for time.

'Can you show me the extra finger?' asked Bernice.

'Of course,' said Neon, graciously, taking Bernice by the arm but holding the gun just as tightly and nudging the barrel – just a little, probably accidentally – into Bernice's side.

Together, they solemnly looked at the two rows of long, thin fingers on the nearest paw.

'I'll tell you what,' said Neon. 'You count them.' Bernice frowned. 'Go on!' Neon nudged her again – just a little, probably not at all accidentally – with the gun.

Bernice threw a look to Jack, who shrugged, mouthing what looked like: 'Count them already!'

'One. Two. Three...' Bernice counted aloud, starting on the bottom row of fingers and pointing to them in turn from right to left. 'Four. Five. Six. Right?'

Neon nodded encouragingly as Bernice's eyes travelled up to the higher row of fingers. She glanced at Jack, who was keeping his eyes firmly on the turned backs of the servers. Damn him, why wasn't he doing something more useful, like removing the Cat's explosives?

'Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven.' Bernice counted the fingers on the top row as slowly as she could. 'Eleven fingers on this paw. It must be the *other* paw that you think has the extra finger.'

'Wrong,' said Neon, smiling sweetly. 'You're blind, Professor Summerfield, because you only see what you expect to see. All the other Cats have eleven fingers on each front paw, so why would this one be any different? Ha! Look closer.'

Bernice stepped nearer to the Cat. The flickering lamplight made its stone body seem to ripple, and she put out a hand to steady herself.

'I still don't see it,' she said.

Neon pushed forward and grabbed Bernice's wrist, then tugged her hand on to the statue's surface, forcing her to rub her palm along the groove that ran up the middle of the last finger in the line. Filled with a sudden revulsion, Bernice shook her arm free and stepped away from the Cat.

‘That’s a crack in the stone,’ she said, coldly. ‘Just a crack. Nothing more. These Cats are really old you know, Neon.’

But Neon hadn’t heard her. She was caressing the fracture in the stone and gazing lovingly up at the Cat. ‘Oh Twenty-three, my pet,’ she said. ‘It’s time for you to purr out your message to me!’

‘Neon, wait,’ Bernice said, desperately. ‘We can talk about this.’

‘Stand back,’ snarled Neon. ‘I’m not waiting a second longer.’ She pointed her gun at the nearest Tsara bomb. Bernice lunged for the gun, but Neon let it drop from her fingers it with a laugh. It clattered to the ground as Bernice paused in confusion.

‘Go,’ said Neon.

From the belly of the Cat came a rumbling noise unlike anything Bernice had ever heard before. It was the swell of twenty-three detonations cut off before they reached their full extent. Twenty-three points on the base of the Cat glowed, as the light from the explosions bulged crazily, each contained within an invisible bubble.

‘What have you done?’ yelled Bernice. She took a step forward, but Jack caught hold of her arm.

‘I said stand back,’ said Neon, pointing the gun at her. ‘This is *my* moment. Whatever’s inside this Cat, I intend to be the first to see it.’ She was at the base of the statue, so close she was almost touching it. Twenty-three sections of the Cat’s belly had cracked open, and Bernice could see the shattered chunks of stone tumbling around in their rippling bubbles, silently colliding and sparking. ‘It *is* hollow,’ Neon crowed triumphantly over her shoulder. ‘I was right...’

Then there was a cracking noise from the underside of the Cat. In the light of the bubbles, Bernice could see fractures appearing outside the circle of explosives, streaking down the sides of the Cat and along the legs.

‘No,’ Neon shrieked, ‘that’s not supposed to happen!’

Bernice heard the sickening sound of ancient stone parting from ancient stone, followed by the crash, crash, crash of chunks of rock falling to the ground. First, a few smaller pieces plummeted from the Cat’s side then whump! A huge section to the right gave way. There was a rush of noise – a clatter – and Neon’s face contorted into a scream of horror as the contents of the Cat’s stomach disengorged itself on top of her.

Bernice watched in silent horror as hundreds of bones fell from the hole, smashing to the ground and tumbling outwards. Skulls, leg bones, arm bones and teeth dropped into a massive pile, with a pressure that could only mean that the Cat had been stuffed to bursting point with skeletons. Bernice put a hand to her face to try and hide the sickening, stale smell.

Ruth sank to her knees and was sick on the grass.

The servers shifted slightly, keeping their guns trained on the dark trees, but obviously unsure whether they should move to help Neon or keep guard.

‘Ruth, it’s okay,’ Bernice tore her eyes from the remains that continued to fall from the monstrous Cat, spilling over its long fingers and sliding into the mud. She crouched beside her friend. ‘It’s just bones.’

Ruth tried to signal she was fine, but another wave of nausea hit her and she started to choke again. ‘It’s not the bones,’ she spluttered. ‘You know that stuff in my head I couldn’t reach? I’m getting it all. Right now.’ She curled up on the ground, whimpering. ‘And they’re not just bones.’ She heaved a huge breath. ‘These are the *Nobal*.’

‘How do you know?’ Bernice asked in confusion.

‘Because of the Library.’ Ruth rocked backwards and forwards on her knees, holding her head. ‘It’s too *much*.’

‘Oh my goodness,’ said Jack, snapping his fingers. ‘If they’re the Nobal then I know why your clever little brain was holding back on you up till now. Shall I tell you?’

Ruth groaned, keeping her eyes screwed shut.

'I'll take that as a "yes",' said Jack, excitedly. 'I think that you couldn't access the future knowledge you'd downloaded until now, because it wasn't any old future knowledge. It was knowledge that was dependent on *your* future. On this exact moment.'

Bernice put a protective hand on Ruth's shoulder and gave Jack a look that was meant to ask if this was really the time.

'Ruthie,' he said, in a gentler tone. 'Can you tell us what the Nobal looked like? Were they similar to the Bal? Bigger? Smaller?'

'They're the *Cats*,' said Ruth, gulping air and staring at the pile of bones. 'It's obvious. The Nobal were cats with lots of fingers.' She burst into tears.

Bernice gestured at Jack to give Ruth some space. He nodded and walked over to the damaged Cat. The bones had finally finished falling and Neon was crawling slowly away from the pile, covered in the fine, yellowy powder that had flown into the air when the bones crashed down.

'Don't you want to know who put them in the statues?' whispered Ruth. Bernice shrugged to show that she could wait, but Ruth shook her head. 'It helps to say it out loud,' she said. 'They did it to themselves, Benny. And they were *alive* when they went in. They must have starved to death. Oh, god, they were completely insane.'

The explosion bubbles were getting smaller as the pieces of rubble they contained disintegrated safely into a fine dust. The silent flames created an eerie circular glow, that looked as though the Cat was being pestered by a giant firefly. Neon sat at the edge of the pile of bones, her arms wrapped around her body.

'Ruth, calm down,' said Bernice, putting her arms protectively around her shaking friend. 'You don't need to think about this now.'

'But she can't help it,' said Jack, wandering back with a thin bone in his hand. 'Don't you see? The cat's out of the bag. Or the bones are out of the Cat. People are going to write all sorts of books about these skeletons and whatever else they find in there, and thanks to Ruth and that ridiculous Library, we've got a sneak preview. Isn't that right, Ruth?'

'A new strain of bug appeared,' said Ruth, frowning in concentration. 'The Cats ate it and it sent them mad. A lot of the books seem to think that a hallmark of the infection was an inability to gauge the depth of your own insanity. So when the Nobal came up with the plan of building giant Cat tombs, everyone thought it was the best idea ever.'

'Which it clearly isn't,' said Bernice.

'Well, exactly,' said Ruth. 'Either they simply shut themselves inside the Cats and waited until the bugs went away – which didn't happen – or it was a noble sacrifice to stop the spread of infection. No-one knows for sure.'

'That's horrible,' said Bernice.

'It's why no-one has ever found a body.' Ruth looked at her friend. 'Before this, the Nobal had a tradition of burning their dead.'

Bernice knelt down next to Neon, who was sifting through the bones with a glazed look in her eyes. Many were already crumbling in the night air. Bernice looked for the Cat's fingers, but its front paws were covered in dust and rubble. There was no way she could count them again, no way she would ever know if Neon had been right or wrong about the extra finger. She moved back and there was a snap from under her knee. To her horror, she saw that she had cracked one thin bone clean in half. It looked like a fingerbone, long and slender, roughly double the length of her own.

'What do you think the message is now, Neon?' she asked. She was burning with rage at this act of vandalism. 'What is the Cat trying to say to you?'

In the glint of the fiery bubbles, tears were streaking down Neon's face. She was on her hands and knees, picking up handfuls of bones then letting them slip through her fingers and drop back on the pile, like stones on a beach. She had pulled off the hood of her vis suit and her cheeks were covered in dust. Bernice could see a large bruise rising on her forehead and her eyes were bloodshot. 'I don't understand,' she said, bewildered. 'I can't feel it. I can't feel anything.'

'What were you *expecting* to feel?' asked Bernice. 'What did you think would be inside, Neon?'

'The Cat's soul,' said Neon, then gave a short, barking laugh. '*All right?* I was expecting to feel the Cat's soul.'

Above their heads, the explosion bubble continued to burn out. The bright light that it had cast over the Cat was gone, and the twenty-three lamps suddenly seemed dull in comparison.

'Stop or I'll fire!'

Six servers' voices sounded in unison from the darkness behind her. Bernice whipped round, automatically raising her hands, but there were no guns pointing at her. The servers were aiming at the head of the Bal Ambassador.

'Gun away,' clicked the Ambassador, with a hint of contempt. 'Bal here.' There was the hiss of a thousand wingpits opening, and a cloud of choking smoke billowed out of the trees. Through her watering eyes, Bernice could see the entire Bal village crouched behind the Ambassador, no longer standing on their lower legs, but crawling on all six. They swarmed over the servers, their spikes glistening, and within seconds the androids had disappeared under a heap of bristling insects. There were no gun shots. The servers didn't stand a chance.

Neon, Jack, Ruth and Bernice huddled closer together with their backs to the pile of bones. 'Well,' said Bernice. 'Remind me never to hire a server as a bodyguard.'

'Oh god, oh god,' Neon was muttering. 'Do something, someone, do something...'

But the Bal did not attack the mammals. Every now and then, one would skitter out from the pile, bristling its legs and chittering at the humans on the ground, then dash back to the safety of the swarm. The servers were gradually being dismembered, and bits of their arms, legs and circuitry rolled out from under the seething pile in a way that Bernice found ghoulishly similar to the Nobal's bones.

'If we're very, very lucky,' said Jack, from out of the corner of his mouth, 'they'll all be too phobic to touch us.'

How to overcome a fear of mammals in several easy steps, using the self-exposure technique:

Step 1: Draw a small circle on a piece of paper, then draw four lines through the circle for legs. Work your picture up to the biggest and most accurate version you can manage. Don't forget to show all those horrid fingers and toes!

Step 2: Ask a young friend or relative to dress up and act like a human around near you. This will help you get you used to the smooth, unnatural movements.

Step 3: Look at a small dead mammal in a sealed jar, first at a distance, then closer.

Step 4: Then at a live one in a sealed jar, first at a distance, then closer.

Step 5: Then in a partly opened jar, then more and more open, until you feel okay about breathing the same air...

The Bal Training Guide for New Ambassadors
transl. Ramona Sings

CHAPTER TWENTY

ULTIMATUM

A terrible screech came from the mouth of Ambassador Grey Line and the twitching pile of Bal stopped moving at once.

'Grey Line talk,' it said, and the Bal moved back towards the trees, their work done.

Bernice tried not to look at the dismembered servers, reminding herself that, despite the personality chips, they had only been machines after all.

'Ambassador,' said Bernice, getting shakily to her feet. 'I'm so sorry I got out of the cage before I finished writing. If you let us go back to the compound safely, I'll copy out the rest of the Rule Book straight away.'

'You in cage?' The Ambassador looked puzzled.

'Yes, of course I was.'

The Ambassador shrugged. 'All look same,' it said.

'Well, that's charming,' said Jack.

'We had an agreement,' Bernice pressed on, 'that I'd be free when I finished copying it. I'd like to think we can extend the agreement to my friends here.' She gestured at Ruth, who was still slumped on the ground holding her head, Jack – who attempted a cheerful wave – and Neon, crouched in the rubble.

'Understood,' hissed the Ambassador. 'But agreement made before Bal knew about bomb in village.'

'I'm sorry, *what?*' said Bernice.

The Ambassador held up something small, red and marble-shaped. It glowed, pulsing with red and orange light. All eyes turned to the sphere. The other Bal moved further into the trees and Bernice and Ruth shrank back towards the bones. Jack winced.

'That's not a bomb,' called Neon, getting to her feet to get a closer look. 'I'd know. I'm good at bombs.'

'Is bomb!' said the Ambassador. 'Look it! Very suspicious glow. Your mammal hid it in village.'

'Which mammal?' asked Bernice. Jack was gently plucking at her sleeve. 'Can you describe them? Jack, get off.' She stopped as realisation dawned, and grabbed his arm, turning to face him. 'Is this something to do with you?'

'It's what the servers were looking for,' said Jack.

'And you left it in the village?'

'Mm,' agreed Jack.

'Is it important?' asked Neon, testily. 'It doesn't look important.' Bernice wouldn't have thought it possible, but with that comment, her opinion of her fellow archaeologist fell even lower.

'It's part of Star Seasons' Library,' said Jack, grandly. 'And it is of course, both important and dangerous. But not a *bomb*. Anyway,' he hissed at Bernice, 'I didn't think anyone would find it.'

'Bal not stupid,' said the Ambassador. 'Toilet waste flows down pipes. Workers use waste to fix stilts, build huts. Plop! Bomb appears from meeting room pipe where mammal had been.'

Jack made a loud retching noise. 'That is the most disgusting thing I ever heard.' He paused, then grinned disarmingly. 'Oh, actually, no it's not. Anyway, there's no need to get your thorax in a twist. It's not a bomb.'

'I say *is* bomb,' hissed the Ambassador.

'Oh, what are you, in your year of being especially annoying?' asked Jack. 'You'd have to be mad to think that was a bomb.' There was a chattering sound from the trees, and Jack looked incredulously at the assembled Bal. 'What is that? Agreement? You all think it's a bit mad?'

'Plague!' clicked a voice from the crowd. 'Ambassador infected!'

'Where have you got *that* from, you insect morons?' said Neon who seemed to have regained her equilibrium enough to glare at the bristling creatures.

'Pain in eye,' screamed one Bal.

'Legs itch,' said another Bal with a whimper.

'Antennae shaking,' came another.

'Can't remember own name.'

'Plague!'

'Plague! Plague! Plague!'

'Get a grip,' said Neon. 'You're hysterical. None of that sounds like a plague. What makes you think that?'

Then, from the ranks of the Bal, a high-pitched voice started to sing.

'Eyes split and shrunken.

Skin colour of the sky.

Leg-ends useless and lumpen...'

'Bal poetry again?' said Neon, sarcastically. 'Just what we need.'

But Bernice was thinking fast. There was something about the words of the song that rang a bell in her head. 'Wait,' she said. 'Just stop for a second. Sing it again. Slowly.'

'Why?' asked the Ambassador.

'Because I've got an idea,' said Bernice. 'Just sing it.'

The Ambassador made an irritated sign with one of his legs and together, hundreds of Bal voices picked up the words of the eerie song.

'...Voices shrill and too high.

Deadly shakes come on.

Steam rises. Mind is gone.'

The last note hung in the air.

'Thank you,' said Bernice. 'Right, everyone here's the thing. You can't possibly have the Plague,' she paused, 'because you *are* the Plague. Or rather, your ancestors were. That song is describing *you*.'

There was silence.

'And I reckon the Nobal wrote that song, a long time ago, before they all died.'

An angry murmur came from the crowd.

'It all fits. If they're the Cats, then they had two big eyes. No wonder a Bal's hundred small eyes seemed "split and shrunken". Your skin is blue, your 'leg ends' are – well, useless and lumpen seems a bit harsh – but let's face it, you've got no fingers and the Cats have loads. I imagine they were pretty proud of them.'

Bernice could see that she had got the Bal's attention.

'Your voices are high, you shake when you're angry, and let off all that steamy, gassy stuff from under your wings.' Bernice stared triumphantly around. 'You see? That rhyme doesn't describe the *signs* of the Plague, it describes the bugs that caused it. The ones to look out for, to make sure you don't *eat*. Have you ever wondered where your "don't eat insects" rule came from?'

'Speculation,' hissed the Ambassador.

'A bit,' admitted Bernice. 'But there's evidence too. If you look at Cats for long enough, I think you'd see that the bugs carved next to their mouths are a smaller version of you.'

The Ambassador clicked its wings together in what seemed like consternation. Ruth had managed to stand up and moved forward, taking hold of Bernice's hand and squeezing it supportively.

'Oh bravo, Professor,' sneered Neon, stepping forward and clapping her hands together slowly. 'But what makes you the queen of ancient Bubastian history? This is *my* expedition. How *dare* you!' She snapped her fingers. 'Your entire theory relies on your friend's ramblings and she's spouting books that haven't been written yet! Who is going to believe that?'

'Ruth, how many books about the Nobal do you have in your head?' asked Jack.

'An astonishingly painful one hundred and twelve,' said Ruth.

'How many of those are published after today's date?'

'One hundred and two.'

'Blimey,' said Jack. 'You were lucky you picked such a random subject to access, Ruth. Imagine if you'd asked the Library for something interesting, like all the books on Doctor Butler's titillating theory of space harems. Your brain would have exploded.'

'Ahem,' said the Ambassador.

Bernice looked at the Ambassador guiltily. She'd been so carried away with her theory she had almost forgotten there was an army of Bal ready to attack. Except... Now she looked, there weren't really. The smoke had cleared and the Bal in the trees no longer looked threatening. Their leg spikes had retracted, and most of them were standing upright again.

'Ambassador,' said Bernice. 'Can we call a truce?'

'You forget bomb?' clicked the Ambassador.

'Oh for heaven's sake, it's not a bomb.'

'Is bomb,' said the Ambassador, stubbornly. 'It *glow*.'

Jack stomped through the mud towards the Ambassador and grabbed the Future Retrieval Device that still pulsed in its grasp. 'This is not a bomb,' he said, 'and I can prove it. If it was a bomb, I wouldn't do *this*.' And he opened his mouth, tossed in the tiny, red marble, and swallowed it.

There was a gasp from the assembled Bal as Jack gagged and staggered backwards, clawing at the air.

'Jack!' cried Bernice in alarm.

'I forgot it had insect poo on it,' he spluttered.

'Leave Bubastis *now*,' hissed the Ambassador.

Bernice suddenly found herself struggling not to laugh. She tried to compose her face into a sincere and thankful expression, but was nearly pushed off her feet by Neon, barging her way towards the Bal Ambassador.

'Leave Bubastis?' she screamed. 'I have the rest of my investigation to complete!'

'Wait,' said the Ambassador. It turned its myriad eyes to the assembled villagers. 'Light Pink, how eyes?' it asked, slowly.

'Seem... fine,' said a young Bal, hesitantly.

'How itchy skin, Hint of Purple?'

'Not bad,' said another Bal, looking rather ashamed.

'Shiny Rose. Still shake?'

'Not right now.'

'Any Bal feel plague?' There was silence in the Bal ranks. The Ambassador swivelled its eyes back to Neon who was standing with her hands on her hips in front of him, waiting. 'So,' said the Ambassador. 'Grey Line willing to admit symptoms hysterical. This why mammals free to go. But new rule on Bubastis: No mammals allowed. This why mammals leave.'

'Understood,' said Bernice.

'Now look here —' began Neon.

‘*Neon*,’ said Bernice. ‘You are in more trouble than you can imagine for blowing a hole in that Cat. Don’t make it worse for yourself.’

Neon flashed a superior look that suggested she doubted anyone would dare to give her trouble over something so ridiculous, but she said nothing.

‘Just one thing though, before we go, Ambassador,’ said Bernice. ‘It probably sounds a bit silly, but I... I can’t bear the thought of *no-one* investigating the Cats or the bones. Please tell me that you’re going to do a bit of research. It doesn’t have to be mammals that write all those future books you know. You could add a new year into your calendar, maybe call it the year of Bubastian history?’ She looked at the impassive face of the Ambassador. ‘If you don’t have that one already, that is,’ she added, quickly.

The Ambassador twitched its head, suggesting to Bernice that they didn’t. ‘Maybe replace year of crochet,’ it said.

As they were looking at the faces of the statues, we asked our passengers what emotions they thought the Cats were expressing. The answers 'bored,' 'tired', 'sad' and 'lonely' were among the most common.

We then told our passengers that the faces of the Cats are said to reflect the emotion of the observer. Following this, the answers that occurred the most were 'serene, 'magical, 'secretive' and 'powerful.'

No More Rest Stops 'Til the Moon: Reflections of Life as an Interplanetary Tour Guide
JJ Secker

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LEAVING BUBASTIS

Back at Bright Blessings, it didn't take long for Bernice to realise that there was no-one coming to collect them. The message that the servers had sent the previous night requesting a transporter had not been picked up and, even now, no-one at Star Seasons was replying on any of the frequencies she tried.

Neon sat at the desk in her office, fiddling with a plate of croissants. The morning sun was streaming through the window, and the insects outside were in full voice. She had refused to pack up any of her equipment or files, insisting that she was going nowhere.

'You're coming back to Star Seasons with us, whether you like it or not,' said Bernice, tight-lipped. There was no way that she was leaving the woman behind to continue her vandalism, or – however tempting the idea – to get herself killed by the Bal.

Bernice had been surprised to find Irving's shuttle in full working order when they arrived back at the compound. A group of students had been working on it through the night, led by Dave, who turned out to be studying engineering and mechanics. She tested the engines and ran a check on all the basic systems, and found it was perfectly capable of the journey to Star Seasons. The lesson seemed to be that there was nothing like a bit of mortal danger to get students to actually do something useful.

Bernice helped Mina to board the shuttle, and tucked her up in Ruth's cabin. Although her skin was still blue, the girl was quieter and the effects of her drug experiment seemed to be wearing off a little. Bernice shuddered. She wouldn't want to be in Mina's head when she finally came down from her mammoth trip.

The rest of the students clambered up the steps, clutching their rucksacks and snacks from the canteen. Now that the danger appeared to be over, they were all as excited as if they were coming home from holiday. Neon refused to help count them in, so Bernice checked their names off a list she'd copied from the wallscreen in the office. 'Rufus, Danni, Joe, Haven, Dave, Rupert, Cindy, Allie...' She paused. Allie's eyes were red-rimmed and her face blotchy with tears. 'Are you feeling okay?' she asked, sympathetically.

Allie shook her head and sniffed pathetically through her long, blonde fringe. 'This is the worst day of my *life*,' she said.

'It's okay,' said Bernice. 'Don't worry that you'll get in trouble because of the Cat. I know that none of the students had the slightest clue what was going on last night. You weren't even there.'

'No, I wasn't. Because last night I was talking to Cindy about Rufus in the dorm,' said Allie, in a strangled voice. 'She says he's changed since he saw the Dean die and he's all like, introverted? She doesn't want to dump him now, because it would seem too mean.'

Bernice attempted a sympathetic smile as a desperate tone crept into Allie's voice.

'Anyway, she really needed someone to talk to and... so I stayed with her instead of helping out and... it's not my *fault* I didn't know how to fix a shuttle and Danni did. It doesn't mean I'm useless...' sobbed the girl. 'Am I *very* ugly?'

Bernice looked around for Ruth or Jack to help her out. This conversation was taking her a little outside her comfort zone. 'No, of course you're not,' she said. 'Listen, there are *counsellors* on Star Seasons you can talk to, they'll understand how you feel about all this.'

Allie gave a deep sigh. 'I guess I feel betrayed,' she said.

'By Neon?' asked Bernice. 'I suppose that's only natural.'

'By *Haven*. Are you even listening to me?' Allie looked irritated. 'Haven dumped me for Danni after they spent the night fixing the shuttle.'

'Ah,' said Bernice, a little embarrassed. 'Sorry, I didn't know. I thought, you know. The trauma of the Bal threat or...' She trailed off. 'But other than, er, romantically, you're okay?'

Allie made a face that suggested the world was going to end and wandered off to join her friends.

One of the students showed Jack where the Dean's body was, still wrapped up tightly. Jack stowed the body on the shuttle, then escorted Neon to Bernice's cabin and locked her in. Her air of righteous indignation at being forced to leave the planet was too much to bear. Then, he went to find Bernice.

'I bet Star Seasons had no *idea* what Neon was doing down there,' said Bernice. 'They'll probably want start an investigation straight away.'

'Does that mean that as soon as we get back to Star Seasons, Neon's not our problem any more?' said Jack.

'Yup,' said Bernice. 'That's the plan. Then we just have to tell Bil you ate the Library Device.'

'Oh, Benny,' wheedled Jack. 'I thought we'd agreed it was for the best. Besides,' he put an arm around Bernice's shoulders, 'you know there's only one thing Bil will care about, after we've given him his niece back. Your book of poems.'

'I know,' groaned Bernice. 'But I'm just going to have to tell him I didn't have time to do it.'

'Or,' said Jack. 'You could start work right now.' He reached into Ruth's bag and produced the stack of blue, crumpled paper that Bernice had saved from the Bal cage. 'I'll tell Bil I ate his experimental ball,' he said, 'as long as you make it worth my while by actually doing the job we set off to do in the first place. You promised me a share of the big bucks, Summerfield. So chop-chop.'

'I can't write on that horrible paper,' Bernice said. 'I've already used it all on one side. Anyway, surely I've done enough of this by-hand business. Why can't I dictate something to the computer?'

'As a poet, I'd say the old fashioned methods are best,' said Jack, airily. 'Besides, I don't trust you. If you used the computer, you'd cheat.'

'What do you care if I cheat?' asked Bernice, suspiciously. 'Are you just after a cheap laugh?'

'A bit,' said Jack. 'But I also think the universe might end if you don't.'

'Really?' Bernice narrowed her eyes.

'I don't know,' said Jack. 'But my reasoning is that it's better you write it and we never find out. Plus, if the world *doesn't* end, I can spend the rest of my life telling people I saved the universe.'

'Okay,' said Bernice, slowly. 'Well, I suppose I did feel a bit inspired when I first saw the Cats.'

Jack leaned back and knitted his fingers together behind his head. 'I'm listening,' he drawled.

'*Oh Cats!*' said Bernice.

'You make me feel so small.

Yet your long fingers to me call.

I once had a pet who was a cat.

A friend was more where he was at.

You tower above the trees on Bubastis...'

She stopped. 'I can't think of anything that rhymes with Bubastis.'

Jack was pressing his wrist into his mouth and shaking slightly. He coughed and cleared his throat with a grin. 'Never mind, let's write that down,' he said. 'After all, it doesn't really matter what you write, as long as you write something. There aren't many authors who have that luxury. Publish and be damned!'

'What if I write something completely different from the future version Bil read?' asked Bernice.

'Let's not even think about that,' said Jack. 'We'll assume that whatever you write is what you have always been going to write and is therefore what Bil has read.'

'Bloody hell,' said Bernice. 'I need a drink. Can *you* think of anything that rhymes with Bubastis?'

'Corn plasters?' suggested Jack. 'Molasses? Nobody said the poems had to be about Bubastis. Maybe you need to reach back further into your past for inspiration. How about a whimsical poem of childhood? That sort of thing goes down a treat where I'm from.'

'My childhood wasn't exactly filled with whimsy,' said Bernice.

'Maybe an adventurous epic then,' said Jack. 'A fantasy! Monsters you've met. Things you've slayed.'

'Been there, done that,' said Bernice. Jack raised an eyebrow. 'You don't know everything about me.' Jack raised the other eyebrow. 'Oh go away,' said Bernice. 'Leave me alone for a bit. I'll think of something, all right?'

Cat big.

Cat stone.

Cat too close to home.

Cat big.

Cat tall.

Cat fingers me appall.

Poem About Cat

Grey Line Bal

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

FRIENDS OF STONE

As Bernice entered the opulent lobby of Star Seasons with her dishevelled group of students dragging along behind her, she sensed something was wrong. There was nobody around, no server or train at the monorail station and a crackly static coming from the speakers instead of muzak.

'Is anyone else finding this a little creepy?' she asked, while Jack tried to get a response out of the map on the wall.

'The power's been switched off,' he said. 'Let's leave the students in the entertainment lounge and find Bil. Ruth, can you stay with them?'

Ruth nodded. 'I'm not having Neon though,' she said, nodding at the other archaeologist.

'You people,' said Neon casually, 'are savages.' She seemed, on the outside at least, untouched by her recent experiences.

Jack took Neon's arm and Bernice held out a hand for Mina, who beamed beatifically and drifted after them.

The Research Facility turned out to be as deserted as the Seasons, and the riser refused to work at all. As they trudged up the stairs to Bil's floor, Bernice wished they could find a way of shutting off the grating noise coming from the speakers. It was unpleasant and unsettling. Where was everyone? It was as if the Star Seasons itself had gone into mourning for the dead Dean, she thought, then wished she hadn't.

When they reached Bil's office, the door was firmly shut.

'We need to be careful,' said Bernice in a hushed voice. But Neon wrestled her arm from Jack's grip and pushed her way forward to the door.

'I'm sure we'll be quite safe,' she said. 'This is all part of my adventure. Look!' And she gestured to the number on the door. Twenty-three.

Mina stepped forward and knocked on the door a couple of times. 'Uncle Bil?' she said, trying the handle. The door swung open.

Professor Gloap sat bolt upright at his desk as they entered. 'Mina!' he exclaimed, his voice a mixture of joy and terror. But he didn't stand up and, as Mina stepped into the room, his eyes flicked quickly to his right and back again. It was enough of a warning for Bernice. She moved in front of Mina, pushing her back into the corridor then whipped round to see what Bil had been looking at.

Standing behind the door, his gun pointed directly at Bil, was Octavius Gregory. He smiled, a lop-sided charming smile. 'I've been waiting for you,' he said.

'For me?' said Bernice, trying not to look flattered.

'No,' said Gregory, his smile dropping for a second. 'For Neon.' He tried to peek around the door to see her but couldn't manage it without compromising his position. 'Anyone else out there, get into the room,' he demanded. 'Or I'll shoot.'

Bil quivered in his chair as Neon, Jack and Mina entered the room.

'Shut the door,' said Gregory, 'and line up against the wall.'

'Greggy, whatever are you doing?' asked Neon. 'Is this some kind of joke?'

'No joke, Neon,' said Gregory. 'I see you got my message?'

'Your message?' said Neon, softly pressing one hand to her forehead then exhaling a long, low breath. 'And what message would that be?'

'The one telling you to come here immediately because I had taken Star Seasons hostage,' said Gregory testily.

'Oh, no,' said Neon, sadly. 'No, that'll just be another message I didn't get.'

'Then why are you here?' demanded Gregory, waving his gun. Bil whimpered and looked pleadingly towards Mina.

'It's... complicated,' said Neon.

'So's everything with you,' sneered Gregory. 'Try me.'

'We-ell,' said Neon. 'I made the most significant archaeological find of the century, the Dean was killed, the Bal have gone wild, Mina needs to see a doctor, and –' she turned to Bernice with a nasty look on her face. 'Ooh, let me see. Bernice and Jack here have stolen important technology from Star Seasons and need to be arrested. Isn't that right?'

'Not on your life,' said Jack.

'So tell me,' said Neon, sweetly, returning to look at her ex-husband. 'Why do you have a gun pointed at this poor man's head?'

'He's not a poor man,' spluttered Gregory. 'He's the Deputy Dean of Star Seasons.'

'Acting Dean, I think you'll find,' said Neon. 'Didn't you hear me? The Dean was *killed*. We've brought back his body.'

Bil looked at Bernice with questioning eyes and she nodded, mouthing the word 'sorry' to him.

'God, you make me angry, Neon,' said Gregory. 'It doesn't matter. This man is a *hostage*. We have taken over Star Seasons. The servers have been shut down. All the guests and staff have been sent home, except this one.' He glared at Bil, who cowered. 'The journalists are locked in the dining room.'

Neon gave Gregory a pitying look. Bernice sensed that a large part of her was actually enjoying this confrontation with her ex-husband. 'All for my benefit, Greggy?' she said. 'You shouldn't have gone to all the trouble. I'm guessing that by "we" you mean...?'

'The Friends of Stone,' said Gregory.

Bernice waited for a further explanation but none came. Gregory and Neon's eyes were locked on to each other and they seemed, for a moment, to have forgotten there were other people in the room.

'Never heard of them,' Bernice said loudly.

'The Friends of Stone profess to be dedicated to seeking out and investigating the ancient, spiritual mysteries behind some of the universe's most neglected monuments.' Neon spoke in a condescending tone. 'I am no longer a Friend. Although, when I joined the group, I gave them my all. Emotionally, financially, physically...' She cast a sour look at Gregory.

'Hey, you mean that's where you two met?' asked Jack.

'It was a whirlwind romance,' said Neon.

'It changed the dynamics of the group,' said Gregory darkly.

Bernice kept her eye on the gun in his hand. It was wavering, not really aiming at Bil's head any more. Gregory was obviously distracted. Would she be able to disarm him without causing harm to anyone in the room?

'Well!' said Neon. 'And where would the group have been without me? Still sitting around in dark rooms, drawing up lists of forgotten monuments, doing nothing! You needed my enthusiasm. And my *money*.'

'Oh yes,' said Gregory, 'your enthusiasm. *You* weren't content with visiting the sacred sites. *You* had other ideas about what you wanted to do to them.'

Bernice opened her mouth to speak, then shut it again. It was clear that Gregory had no idea what had happened on Bubastis. Would telling him add to his obvious instability?

Jack had no such qualms. 'She just blew up a Cat,' he said. 'Kapow. Boom. Bye-bye kitty.'

Gregory stared at Neon for an instant in disbelief, letting go of his gun, which thudded to the office floor. 'Then we're too late,' he said.

In one fluid movement, Bernice sprang forward and picked up the gun, but Gregory didn't flinch. His eyes had filled with tears. Neon, arms folded across her chest muttered something that sounded like 'grow up'.

Mina wafted over to her uncle, put her arms around him and gave him a dreamy hug. 'I missed you,' she said, kissing him on the nose.

'Of course, we knew the Cats were on her list,' said Gregory, in a broken voice. 'You should have heard her at the meetings. "How can we commune with the Cats if we don't find out what's inside?" she says. "In order to prove the Lost Figures of Bud are real we need to demolish the revered tomb of Cartassal." Oh yes, and my favourite: "It'll be easier to worship the stone figure of Jiff without all that sacred smoke, so let's brick up the hallowed Kiln below it." As soon as we worked out where her interests really lay, we knew we had to stop her. We just didn't know which site she would try first.'

'You should have checked out her favourite book,' said Jack. 'Twenty-three fingers made that Cat irresistible.'

'That's not archaeology, Neon,' said Bernice. 'That's just blowing things up. What about all that "sympathetic archaeology" stuff at the press conference?'

'Neon has nothing to do with sympathetic archaeology,' said Gregory, quickly. 'I designed the system to help the Friends tune in to sacred statues.'

Bernice grinned. 'Neon seemed to think it was her invention.'

'And that was why the Friends were determined to track her down and stop her from misusing it,' said Gregory, self righteously. 'As soon as Andrea, our newest member, discovered Star Seasons Research were backing an expedition to Bubastis, we guessed Neon was involved _'

'You let Andrea join the group? I *knew* you fancied that tart!' Suddenly, Neon ran at Gregory, slapping him hard across the face. 'We're still married you know!'

'Andrea's not a tart!' said Gregory, reeling backwards and rubbing his cheek.

'Aaaand this is the point that we leave,' said Bernice, ushering Bil from his chair and steering him, Mina and Jack out of the room. 'Not *you*,' she added as Neon and Gregory made a move for the door. 'You two can stay in here and work out your differences while I find someone to deal with you.' She shut the door firmly behind her.

Then she took a deep breath and opened it again. Gregory and Neon were standing where she'd left them, glaring at each other. 'Sorry, where are the other Friends of Stone?' she asked Gregory.

'They went to try out the tropical milk swimming pool,' he replied irritably.

'Thanks.' Bernice shut the door again. She paused and opened the door again. Was it her imagination or were Gregory and Neon standing a lot closer to each other? 'Two more things. How many of them are there, and are they armed?'

'Three, and no,' said Gregory. 'Now, go away.'

Bernice shut the door for a third time, turning to face her friends but keeping her hand on the handle. Jack started to say something but she gave him a mischievous grin and put a finger to her lips. Then she opened the door again.

Neon and Gregory were locked in a passionate embrace, lips pressed together and arms thrown around each other. Bernice shut the door.

'Bil, can you lock them in?' she asked. Bil took a pass card out of his pocket and swiped the lock. 'Great. And Jack, do you think you can handle the other Friends?'

'Lock them in their milky swimming pool you mean?' he grinned. 'No problem.' Bil handed Jack the pass card, and he sauntered away down the corridor.

There was a seating area in the corridor outside Bil's office, with two uncomfortable-looking orange couches and a potted plant. Bernice helped Mina on to one of the couches. The blue girl lay down, shut her eyes and gave a contented sigh. Bil fussed round her, trying to arrange the cushions under her head to make her comfortable.

'So Bil,' Bernice said. 'I leave you alone for a couple of days, and when I come back you're in a hostage situation?'

'I'm sorry,' said Bil. He stopped plumping a cushion and sat down. Suddenly, he looked his age. 'It all happened so fast. Gregory and his friends had the element of surprise. One of them held up the main operations room, shut down the servers and disabled the comms. Then, they hijacked every single wallscreen on the platform with footage of the four of them shouting and waving their guns around. Everyone just ran for the transporters like panicked rabbits. No heroics.' He gave a small smile.

'But no bloodshed either, I take it?' said Bernice. 'That's got to be a good thing.'

'Oh yes,' Bil nodded. 'I didn't mean to put you in any danger, Bernice. I feel terrible about all this. Thank you for getting me out of that room.'

'No problem,' said Bernice. 'And no need to feel bad. It wasn't your fault.'

'Oh, but it was,' said Bil, sheepishly. 'If I hadn't have invited you to Star Seasons to write that poetry...' He trailed off, looking down at the floor. There was an awkward pause. His eyes flashed upwards, searching Bernice's face in a palpable attempt to read her expression.

Bernice laughed at his comic appearance. 'Yes, Bil,' she said. 'I wrote some poetry. Although,' she added, reaching into a bag and pulling out a sheaf of blue paper, 'I had to write it on the shuttle on the way here, so if you're expecting anything fantastic, you may be disappointed.'

A strange mixture of hope and delight lit up Bil's features and he reached out a hand towards Bernice. 'You really wrote it?'

'I really did.' Bernice passed it over. 'Sorry it's a bit scruffy and so, er, short.' Suddenly, she felt incredibly embarrassed. Why had she let Jack talk her into writing it on the Bal's stupid plasticky paper? 'You'll want to ignore the writing on the other side. I was forced to write it by some psychotic beetles,' she said.

But if Bil was worried about the paper or the scribbled, messy writing, he didn't show it. In fact, he was beaming with delight. 'Oh, Bernice,' he stuttered. 'I can't tell you how grateful I am.'

'It's nothing,' said Bernice.

'Oh dear no, it's *everything*,' said Bil. 'First you bring back Mina and rescue me, and then this too! It's the final clue, the key, the missing piece of the jigsaw. I can publish!'

'Right,' said Bernice. 'Obviously, that's up to you and all, but I think you should know that I wrote it pretty quickly and...'

'It doesn't matter,' said Bil. 'I know what you've written. I've read it already.' He patted the pages. 'And it's perfect, just perfect. I'll transfer a payment into your account immediately.' A thought crossed his mind. 'Oh my goodness,' he said. 'I haven't had a chance to tell you my little bit of news yet. There was a break in! Someone stole a part of the Library system from under our noses. The Experimental Library is no more.'

'Indeed,' said Bernice, rubbing at her nose. 'About that, Bil...'

'Oh, it's no bad thing,' said Bil, comfortably. 'It's all very well creating a lovely library for academics to use, but the whole future books aspect did seem to be getting a little out of hand. Of course, it would only have been academics who used it, not despots or meglomaniacs or... or... lottery players...'

'So easy to enforce library rules against despots and meglomaniacs, I find,' said Bernice. 'So you're not going to replace the stolen part and start again?'

'Ah,' said Bil uneasily. 'Well, it was the Dean's pet project, you know, and he kept a lot of the workings hush-hush. I don't know if anyone would be able to get it all going again, even *with* the stolen device, because the whole thing powered down after the theft. I mean it all just stopped working. I think the wallscreens did it – the ones in the room under the Library – out of spite. They were ever so angry, and now they're in a tremendous sulk. No-one dares go in to try and turn them off.'

'Blimey,' said Bernice.

'Yes,' said Bil.

The two of them stopped talking for a moment, lost in their own thoughts.

'I'm so sorry about the Dean,' said Bernice, eventually. 'From what I hear it was just a terrible accident.'

'That's all right,' said Bil. 'To tell the truth, I was terrified of him.'

Bernice gave him a sympathetic smile. 'So are you the new Dean of Star Seasons?'

'Oh heavens,' said Bil, shaking his head. 'If I am, I resign right now.' He caressed the blue paper on which Bernice's poetry was written in a fond fashion. 'I have more important things to think about. In fact, my dear, shall I tell you a secret?'

Bernice nodded.

'I believe in research, Bernice. Hard graft, trial and error, long nights of searching through files, that sort of thing. The Experimental Library would have been the death of proper research. It would have changed everything – and not for the better. No-one should have access to books from the future.'

'Except you,' said Bernice, looking pointedly at the blue paper.

'Well,' said Bil, with a conspiratorial wink. 'It was only once, wasn't it? No-one needs to know. Besides, your book is no longer in the future – it's here, in my hands. I can't wait to get started.'

He was interrupted by a gentle snore. Mina had finally fallen asleep. 'First, I'll take Mina home of course,' said Bil. 'Oh, Bernice, I'm so grateful to you for bringing her back. If there's anything I can do before you go, then please say.'

'Don't worry,' laughed Bernice. 'I'm not going yet! I can't leave you with all this to sort out on your own.'

'Oh nonsense,' said Bil. 'The Stone people are all being locked up, aren't they? And I'm certainly not going to be the one letting them out. A few strategic phone calls to Altan should get things sorted in no time.'

'I suppose so,' said Bernice, dubiously. 'Still, we've hardly had much of a chance to catch up, have we? I'm sure there's time for a coffee and a chat before we go.' She smiled, remembering the first time she met Bil. 'I've got a lot more stories I can tell you – so much has happened since we were stuck on *Salva Noctra*.'

Bil suddenly looked extremely nervous. He took his glasses off and started to rub them vigorously on his shirt, refusing to meet Bernice's eye. 'Oh dear, I was afraid you'd say something like that,' he said. 'No, thank you, Bernice. My therapist told me I shouldn't – ah – *re-live* any...'

He was saved by the appearance of Jack, hovering near the door at the end of the corridor. 'One swimming pool turned into a temporary jail for three,' he called. 'Rather weedy specimens, though. How on earth did they manage to take over the platform?'

'Well...' began Bil.

'Rhetorical!' called Jack. 'Come on, Benny, I'm quite keen to leave before – you know – the servers are reactivated.'

Bernice sighed. 'I guess it's goodbye then, Bil,' she said, giving the old man a hug. 'And, goodbye Mina.' She patted the sleeping girl on the shoulder and wondered, for a moment, if this would be enough to put the girl off her drug experiments. Then she wondered if there was any alcohol left on the shuttle. She could really do with a drink.

She caught up with Jack, and shook her head at his questioning look. 'No, I didn't tell him you swallowed Star Seasons' property,' she said, reluctantly.

'A good call, I think,' said Jack, with a relieved grin.

'But not because I think you deserve to get away with stealing expensive bits of equipment,' she added.

'Of course not,' said Jack, contritely. 'Why didn't you tell him then?'

'Because I think that with Mina and the students, plus Neon and the Friends of Stone, he's got enough on his plate right now.'

'Don't forget the journalists,' said Jack.

'No,' said Bernice. 'I doubt they're the sort of people who'll let this go.'

Jack took Bernice's arm. 'So, when the device works its way out,' he said. 'Shall I...'

'I don't want to know,' said Bernice. 'Whatever happens, just make sure you don't tell me.'

DEAD DEAN'S DIARIES DECODED!

Well, what do you know, readers? One of our STAR reporters has got his hands on DIARIES belonging to the recently deceased boss of Star Seasons, the disgraced holiday platform for the SUPER-RICH.

Who could have guessed that the ancient Dean (72) who died from horrific multiple STAB wounds inflicted during his stay on BARBARIC no-go area Bubastis – had a secret interest in publications listing winning LOTTERY numbers from around the galaxy?

Siphoning funds to develop a SUPER-LIBRARY for EGGHEADS or a PATHETIC attempt to get RICH quick?

We know what WE think!

The Altan Star

Bexx Branagh

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

AFTER

Twenty-three journalists had been offered a story that could make their name and they all seized the opportunity with relish. After their release, they threw themselves into a frenzied investigation of Star Seasons, the Experimental Library and the late Dean, not to mention Neon Tsara and the Friends of Stone. Then, they published stories in their respective publications with a competitive and furious desire to generate attention-grabbing headlines.

In the year following the closure and continuing investigation into the Star Seasons Leisure Resort and Research Facility, Professor Bil Bil Gloap had to face his fear of shuttles with confined living quarters on four occasions.

The first time, when he was escorted from Star Seasons by the Altan police, induced a full-blown panic attack. But after several sessions with his old therapist, he managed to get hold of a new prescription drug which tricked his brain into thinking any journey was, quite literally, a picnic in a park. This seemed to help.

His second shuttle trip was to Eugenie, a tiny planet covered in mists that he had visited many years ago, as he scoured the galaxy for unusual and remote languages. It was here that he launched Professor Bernice Summerfield's book, *Orisons in Two Languages*. Despite receiving an invitation, Bernice did not attend the launch, although the book went on to become a phenomenon on Eugenie, where people were moved to tears by the sensuous imagery and pure emotion contained in its rhythms.

The third trip took Bil to the university planet of Escutcheon, where he held a more academically-oriented gathering to celebrate the completion of his thesis, *Linguistic and Semantic Indeterminacy in the Homonous Languages of Bubastis and Eugenie - A Comparative Study*. He also took the opportunity to sell the publishing and televid rights, which led to his thesis becoming the best-selling book, *One word, two meanings: The linguistic phenomenon that will blow your brain!* and the spin-off show, *I say potato, you say potato*. During the show, Bil arranged for a Bal and a Eugeniean to stand side by side in two soundproofed booths. The Bal was small, blue and nervous, the Eugeniean resembled a vaporous sheep and had a tendency to waft.

Bil handed them each a copy of *Orisons* and asked them in turn to verify that the first poem, *Cellardor*, was written in their native tongue. They agreed it was, and read it in unison, the clicking voice and the ethereal one pronouncing some of the words in different ways, yet still obviously reading the same poem.

When they finished, he asked the Eugenieian to translate the words for the assembled crowd. A tear came to her eye as she spoke. 'My vale of weeping, give my child the breath to speak...'

Next, Professor Gloap turned to the Bal and asked for his translation. Haltingly he replied. 'The wafer-like Ventura Moth is not to be eaten. It measures six inches from tip to tail and has black spots on its wings...'

The fourth, and final, trip took Bil back to Altan, where he took up a permanent scholarship as Linguistics Laureate for the Altan University Network. The government decided to overlook his involvement in the Star Seasons scandal and concentrate on the financial investments that poured in with an academic celebrity on the payroll. There weren't that many linguistics celebrities to choose from, after all.

Two days after Professor Neon Tsara left Bubastis, the empty Cat crumbled into the marsh.

The remaining four statues had no off-world visitors for a long time. This was due to the fact that the Bal had reassigned their tenth year of life to the protection of Bal history which, in practice, meant ensuring that no mammal set foot on the planet again.

Some of the villagers said it was a shame that no more travellers would be able to visit the Cats, but others demurred. They said it didn't matter. After all, as everyone knew, it was possible to see the Cats from space.

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